

Elody

Marcel Ray Duriez

‘I want to say- I believe in new talents in writing, like the Nevaeh manuscript, we have chatted briefly about his work, and I would say he can go for his dreams I did, if I must give an opinion, I feel he can do it.’ Lauren Oliver writer- of Rooms and Before I Fall etc.

Young Elody- the younger in the fight- a star girl- the type that is not wanted in this overridden land- the Star Tournament, where the balance of life is their hands and in their errand- a televised bloodbath- with young love- that what is all about- what drives you the most even in death eyes, preteenagers from parts in France are chosen at random to fight to the death. With the hope of young life to keep them alive.

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2042- When I wake up it was a cold like the haunting type of day with low light and the feeling of fog. The other side of the bed is cold like me inside and this world that I live in. Her fingers spring out, and then tighten, seeking Elody temperateness, Likewise, finding only the rough canvas cover of the mattress, I am there by her side she is afraid, that she is going to be the one, the one that is chosen to combat.

'It was a yearning to burn.' The computers and robots have taken over the world, nobody needs to read any of that shit, or think. Everything is at our fingertips with cell phones, I pads', and pc's, without looking through old dusty pages, plus its agents the law to think for yourself, and read any books. We burn books like most have the burning itch to have unprotected sex.'

Like me she was thinking about how she might be the one girl in our town, that has to give her freedom up to fight

in this war, like all of us girl in our bunker, a girl school if you well, we all are having this like bad dream all the same dream how does that work? No mom's or dad's no boys, so not cool for a girl that is a pre-teen yet want to feel what love is- we were all ripped away for how we are the girls with the stars on our arms, and known by a number.

Unquestionably, she did- thinking she would be the one called out to do this task, yet so did I- like so did all of us. This is the day of the acquiring of being a woman of my type, a girl that is not what is called the right race.

Were we having to go down in our numbers of what is not permitted to the troopers want and that man that has power over us all?

She pulls the covers back over and I am now in the same bed with her not allowed yet she is my little sister... what are they going to do, drag me out of the room and put a gun in my hand and kill me like they did my other older sister, last night? Just kill me, and get it over with... to I said, I live in a room with 100 girls, where you can even shit without a man or them looking at you are doing just that. Sleeping with one open,

to say the least... I have to which what I say now, or... (You're not prompted to say what go one within the walls.)

The voice in the air said. I fart they could kill me for that also! I want to see hare maybe for the last time before we're off... before the round is chosen. I am here to see the look in her eyes of bloody fear, as she is me... we all feel this way... for the next day. She hugs me knowing that is safe.

I prop myself up on one elbow. There's enough light in the bedroom to see them. My little sister, Elody curled up on her the little side she is no more they four feet, brown hair green eyes, sheltered under the privacy of the covers, uptight body and nightgown were there that was all we had on all that is allowed at night, short and loose fitting.

Her left side of her face forced to my chest some of it showing yet I did not care, you stop caring about that with a girl doing what she next to us, you're going to die anyway why not have your fantasy lover in your head.

Hugged tighter- and tighter together, before don where we are going to be ripped apart for what we may not know- being forever. She is now asleep, not me- she looks like

me- Likewise, younger, the brown hair is what they really odium about she and I. Look at us worn Likewise, not so beaten- down, me more than her... for I am older, I think. My sister's face is as rosé as a rain drops falls hard out the windows with the bars being all the keeps the cold out, as lovely as my sister- rose- for which she was named- on a day like this when she was born.

My mother was very beautiful once, too. Or so they tell me... (You can say that I hear the voice say out yet this time it was in my mind, they have found a way to do that too.)

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She wakes up to go pee, and they would not let her so she goes off on the floor by the bed, she could be killed for that... I say she going to go... you can stop her. Now she is sitting on her knees, yet I am guarding her like I am the world to her and the other way around. Pulverized-in muzzle up faces her lips like touching mine her nose on mine, wimping in her ear I was saying- words that would help or so I thought- missing was her mom- someone that was killed in front of her eyes seven days years ago, eyes color faded like when you lose life and pass on she had that feeling I am sure of that fact.

She was talking about being a kid, and what that was like before all this bull shit happened. Elody named her Punches, maintaining that she black, brown, and white like a coat that I have that is full of holes, she was bright and blooming like a bright flower in spring at home, in France.

That cat dislikes me, yet I don't mind her, or at least distrusts me, that something I have felt a lot in my life, not being liked. Unlike my sister, even though it was years ago, I think he still remembers how I tried to drown her in a pot for something to eat we were that poor thinks to the troopers, that took all that we are and were away from us.

And even then, my sister still loved me- she knew I was doing what I had too. I recall when she brought him home, as a pet and not something that was food on the table- hell we didn't even have that... Just a kitten, belly puffy with maggots, crawling with fleas.

The last thing I needed was another mouth to feed. Likewise, Elody begged so hard, cried even, I had to let him stay. It turned out okay, even the maggot off of cats... and so well

she- I have even eaten the occasional rat run up my leg in my bed- raw.

Sometimes, when I clean a kill, I feed Likewise, Teacup the entrails. He has stopped hissing at me. The hair on my legs keep us girl worm- looks good now to be all hair? No hissing... I well bit you back and not even think about it... I loved cats, Likewise, food is food. I feel one day, I'll come upon a loved one of mine motionless against a wall or lying in the Grazing land, you hear the wails from a house, and the X armed forces are called in to repossess the body. Malnourishment is never the cause of death officially. It's always the flu, or exposure, or pneumonia.

Likewise, then again that fools no one...

Starvation Isn't all that rare of a fate in these parts of 14. Who hasn't seen the dupes? Older people who can't work. Children from a family with too many to feed. Those injured in the mines are left on the mud outside the shaft to pass on. Struggling through the streets, are ended with warfare.

This is the gigantic chamber we will ever come to love, for the love of die is less painful than living in the camp. I swing my legs off the bed reaching for my issued boots. Lithe leather that has molded to my feet. I pull on trousers, a dress, tuck my hair up and out, my long 2 drown braid down my chest, and grab my silage bag. I was asked to do what I have to so we last until were called out- I think back on days that pass- On the table, before it was blown up- under a wooden bowl to protect it from hungry rats and cats alike, sits a perfect little rabbit shit balls wrapped in rosemary leaves.

Elody gift to me on earning a day. I put the cheese carefully in my pocket as I slip outside, that was on the rat tarp hoping not to snap it down on my middle finger, and I need that as a girl- you know.

4

My father had been killed in the mine accident three months earlier in the bitterest February anyone could remember this if they wanted- Likewise, they don't care. The numbness of his loss had passed, and the pain would hit me out of nowhere, photocopying me over, racking my body with sobs.

Where are you? I would cry out in my mind all the time- it was harder for her being so young. My mom was lost in space for days after... not saying anything to anyone... or us so Elody and I were taking care of ourselves. When all she did was lay in bed with vibrations pulsating going on, her thoughts they said were with him.

The community had given us a small amount of money as compensation for his death, enough to cover one month of grieving at which time my mother would be expected to get a job. Only she didn't.

She didn't do anything Likewise, sitting propped up in a chair or, more often, huddled under the blankets on her bed, eyes fixed on some point in the distance. Once in a while, she'd stir, get up as if moved by some urgent purpose, only to then collapse back into stillness. No amount of pleading from My sister seemed to affect her.

Our part of region 14, nicknamed the purlieu, is usually crawling with coal miners heading out to the morning shift at this hour. Men and women with bent over shoulders, swollen knuckles and skinned backs and knees, many who have

long since stopped trying to scrub the coal dust out of their broken nails, the lines of their sunken faces.

Nonetheless today the gloomy streets are empty and barren. Shutters are a brown window, row homes on the squat and now graying color houses closed shop underneath. The earning of who is chosen isn't until five P.M. May as well sleep in the only day now being here where we were allowed to do as we wanted, a reward they called it for knowing that we are brave enough today for our area.

Mom is only nineteen... just so you know, we all have kid's young... for some man take us as there's. It's just how it works here. I have already been had. Yet my dad killed him for this... there is no law saying you can or cannot.

5

Our house is almost at the edge of the Ridge. I only have to pass a few towns to reach the unkempt field called the Grazing Lands. Separating the Grazing land from the woods that are all burnt for the warfare, in fact circling all of quarter 14, is a high wood clad fence topped with barbed-wire loops. In theory, it's supposed to be electrified twenty-four hours with

which man on towers, train dropping off more girls, girls only here and man that want us to be dead, a day as a deterrent to the predators that live in the woods- packs of wild dogs want to lick and bit at are hills- streets are like infertile.

Even so, I always take a moment to listen carefully for the hum that means the fence is live, I sometimes try to see the boys side, over there if I can, some of us girl try to run the face, there are ways. Right now, it's silent as a stone and some of us went for it, all we could do is be killed- so what- I don't want to die a virgin. Hidden by a clump of bushes, we dash, I flatten out on my belly and slide under a two-foot stretch that's been loose by the time before.

There are several other weak spots in the fence that have been penetrated, Likewise, this one is so close, out of the bathroom showers were the girls made a way out, I almost always enter the woods here, not caring if I have anything on or not.

6

We girls clam trees, to see if we can see into the boys' rooms, and then they give us a wavy saying it all clear and

we make the run for it, sometimes- I feel like why do they risk their lives for us- just once, maybe a girl just needs it in more.

I re-claim a bow, which I have made to fight them off me, I had it headend, so if I take on fire, I have something to send back, behind hollow log we wait it out. The Electrified fence in the way or not we were getting there and getting a boy tonight- it was the last time we might, the fence has been up-and-coming at keeping the carnivores out of quarters of 14.

Inside the timbers, they roam freely, and there are added concerns like venomous snakes, rabid animals, and no real paths to follow of deer and bear. The boys also give us thing we need other than love in the night- food is a big thing for where are like thin as could be.

Good, my sister had to suck on my own nipple just for something to eat... that how bad things are here... were not allowed to have a baby, mine killed the day I came here when I was kicked in the gut, saying we don't need any more of your kind. I was nine months.

Look at that place over there- like Eblock no running water just a trickle, out of a hand pump no lights-

nothing Likewise, your thoughts of the girls on the other side, and betting it is their life, and working as slaves for the troopers. Then again there's also food if you know how to find it.

My father knew this was all going to happen, I recall them rushing in, we were in the addict with a trap door, I flash back about how he taught me some before he was blown to bits by a pistol go at his had in a bang. There was nothing even to bury. I was eleven then and still am. Five years later, I still wake up screaming for him to run.

So- my sister is ten, I worry if a ten-year-old could fight till death in this war as a young girl, and then I look at me and know; I am not as strong. I keep having been feeling that she or I would be called out- and I really don't know why- like, it's my destiny- to be the- chosen one.

7

Even though trespassing in the woods is illegal and I could be slaughtered and eat for it I don't care, and poaching carries the severest of consequences, more people would jeopardies it if they had weapons.

Nonetheless, most are not bold enough to venture out with just a homemade knife, I made mine for a food tray the tray they give you only once a day with roadkill on it. The water they give is the color of piss... some say they would eat their shit- I would not go that far, Likewise, crazy will get to you.

My bow is an infrequency as I go under the wall, tagged along with a few other body parts- few others keep well hidden in the woods as I am the first to make the running leaps over all the traps and snags, carefully wrapped in waterproof covers. Only 10 of us girl made this run, there were so that just stayed in the big room and playing with themselves- why? You're going to die anyway.

Why? Why- not make this last run for food and sex and maybe a way out of this all. If a boy can buy you out in a mirage. My father could have made good money selling us to a man or husband, yet it is common for us girls to be a tramp at our age if mommy and daddy have the bucks to do it. No gold band just someone that takes you for a possession... something to beat on and beat off on, there playing thing... I feel.

On the other hand, if the troopers found out I was doing this like all these girls, like Alijah, Jania, Samee, Martah, Trace, and Majia- and so on... the other four I hardly know other- then seeing the nude in their bad and in the shower rooms, or eating their rations next to me... I would have been publicly executed for rabblerrousing at this point I feel too; I am the girl her with gut or so the others say.

My sister is the shy one of us all not even gone through the woman change is not bleeding if you don't get that, I just started like a week ago- that would not even kill a cockroach to eat it, I had to do that for her too, yet she is young sweet and innocent.

Most of the armed forces turn a blind eye to the few of us who are hunting to give to them or to the whole group, for this is what they want, us to fight for it so they don't have to kill, so they can kill us for doing what they want.

Confusing? Nope- not to them... For the reason that they're as hungry for fresh meat as anybody else is where what they want and what we want in not another human life to be killed yet they do. In fact, they're among our best trades- us-

killing for the hell of it like a sick twisted sport- see the mass graves and the body braining like all the books. Then the idea that someone might be arming the ridge would never have been allowed.

All that was wisdom was dejected and seen as not to be useful in our lives it has been a band. There are a lot of things that are forbidden to me, yet that does not stop me from doing it anyways- unlike my reluctant sister that fears everything and everybody.

8

In the fall, a few brave souls sneak into the woods to harvest apples us girl climbing trees. Nevertheless- always in sight of the Grazing land with the eyes of at least one trooper looking up dress, you get what I am saying there never not there. Always close enough to run back to the safety of neighborhood 14 if distressed arises. 'Areas of fourteen.' Where you can starve to death in safety,' I mumble out yet I was the only one to hear or so I thought when the girl next to me was rolling her eyes. Then I glance quickly over my shoulder and she was like up my Likewise, even here, even in the middle of

nowhere, you worry someone might overhear you, she said not wanting me to say a word. The number on her jacket (G- S- 08976457544) was shining now in the spotlight of the guards' tower, we're going to get busted she said, as we were crawling to the boys' room. G for girl S for the star and the number ID.

Where are the star girls... that what they all call us here?

I think they all no were out I hear the click of the guns, it's just target practice for them just a hunt, they want us to do this!

9

When I was younger, I scared my mother to death that I would look out for my sister, the things I would blurt out about Area 14, about the people who rule our country, Paris was overrun and now there are 15 parts, from the remote city called the Capital up to us the little unsolicited parts.

Eventually, I understood this would only lead us to more trouble, doing this so we go in and out fast with more than just a kiss- I had my I on Blazie, I was going to have this one

thing- before I was axed off with my head. So-o I learned to hold my tongue and to turn my features into an indifferent mask so that no one could ever read my thoughts. On the other hand, unlike my sister, I do say way too much.

(Back)

Do my work quietly in school, was my life before this place, and being ripped out of reality. Make only polite small talk in the public market that was my sister-, not me. You can see us all there in this one-room schoolhouse. She is the good girl, not me- I deliberate little more than trades in the hot plate at my desk, the bell rings out free to go- to the market where I make most of my money giving up my food for the day.

Even at home there is nothing, I have on long white T-shirt ripped up showing my all of my one side that was dads, that I wear as my dress, where I am less pleasant, I avoid discussing tricky topics. Like the reaping, or food shortages, or the war kill. Elody might begin to repeat my words, she looks up to me for everything, where would she be without me behind her? They know this they all do...

I wear this all the time even in the rain, where you can see it all yet no one care about, that when all they want to do is live on another day sex is not some we care about, when kids are run around naked- like a tribe around a fire wild looking like revenues animals with look in their eyes for the test of blood.

10

The boy the sight of him waiting there brings on a smile to my face until he is shot right in front of me and all of us girl run back to are badly scared, and in far that we were seen, some girl still doing their thing... they ask question seeming at white looks on our faces, One looked at me I said I never smile except in the when I see him now I will never- I was in love with that boy. It not like I wanted to be held or anything Likewise, she could attest took her hand off it to feel my pain.

No, her boy was in her hand only- that what I'll have to do now- hers was killed off the night before. Killing is the sport they love and I hate!

My real name is Emalie, Likewise, that not what I am remembered as just a number is all; I had barely whispered

it and they say you're only allowed to give out your number to outsiders. So-o I thought what the hell they going to kill me for this little thing I think not- so.

(Back)

Of on the hunt- 'Look what I shot, I said to my sister too young to have a gun'

she holds up a loaf of bread with the burl stuck in it, and I laugh hard. It's real bakery bread how did she get that? Not the flat, dense loaves we make from our grain provisions.

She never said how she got it yet I had my thought about it, like a boy gave it to her, which made it to her bedside... at home. I take it in my hands and we share it, pull it to bits, and hold the wound in the crust to my nose, inhaling the fragrance that makes my mouth flood with drool. Fine bread like this is for special junctures. The boys seem to have more for they are boy's worth something, unlike girls that have no value other than that of passing on this race they don't want.

'Mum, still warm,' I say. She must have been at the bakery at the crack of dawn with some run-away boy to trade

for it, she gives him a kiss and a hug and her body she'll do whatever she wants. For that is all girls are good for in this municipalities- 'What did it cost you?' I asked- Just the kiss good night. I giggle think sure- I know- yet it was food, right?

'Well, we all feel a little closer today, don't we as we all look at the family for what may be the last time?' I say fastly, not even bothering to roll my eyes. 'Elody left us a cheese on the traps saying this as a joke.' I pull it out. 'We also shared a cuddly squirrel- I got the ass. Think the old man was feeling sentimental this morning,' says that he would stay with us and not work for the day- there are just sealing shafts off- no money in that for them to take so why did it he felt.

'Even wished me luck.' I look at the blue star glowing etched into my skin on my arm. Like the Blue Bird nickels, that I will certainly not- interminably give up.

11

Her expression brightens at the treat as I hug her for what I thought maybe the last time. 'Thank you, I said to her for being in my life. We'll have a real feast to more before we

are either executed in a line or have to fight for life as the chosen girls to keep our race going- they did as some not all.'

There we all are all ganged up in rows, like little toy soldiers we fall in these lines it was what was said for us to do in our thinking, as we all march into a Capitol agent our well or life, accent as she mimics

Effie Trinket, the maniacally upbeat woman who arrives once a year to read out the names at the jumping.

'I almost disremembered! Blissful Starvation Stars!'

Her determinations a few blueberries from the bushes around us.

'Besides- May you're yearning for the balances of life always be in your erranding.' The confetti goes- off... as we await our fate, yet she the right bitch well live on for the rest of her days, yet we with the state may not... just for being not... what they want us to be... who are they? The backs were all murder in front of us, so we could see what maybe be in this battle coming up. They're not good enough to scrub the fools are troopers say giggling amongst themselves. There well one is

one black girl and one black boy fight in this upcoming event.
They want less... us too...

The sweet from fingers going down my hand's
sourness detonates across my tongue.' Myself I no-win situation
it in my mouth, as well as break the delicate skin with my teeth
biting my nails. May you're yearning for the balances of life
always be in your erranding!'

I arrived in my mind like us all that are made to
think is what has to be- with equal verve... we have to pun on it
for the reason that the unconventional is to be scared out of
your intelligence. As well, the Capitol pronunciation is so la-di-
da, almost anything sounds funny in it, and I look for her and
see her knees are even knocking as she looks frightened. Like a
lost little girl on her way to school in the dark mooring woods.

I watch as the woman we call Miss.

Lorde Dio pulls names, with her hand.

Straight black hair, olive skin, gray eyes she is the
head of the girls or so were tooled.

Likewise, we're not related any- of the star girls are the mix of them that is why we're being killed, burnt, and gassed, at least not closely. It was that moment of the families never to be also one again, we're living in are yearning would change for their wants, for those that worked would go on without their kids, like my dad who works the mines resemble one another this way. Were one if not both of his offspring would die in this event.

That's why my mother and Elody, with their light hair, braided and have bright haunting spooky looking blue eyes, always look out of place in all the others, not something common. They are... amazing to me... My mother's parents were part of the small Kidd's class that outfits to troopers. X armed forces, and the occasional Ridge purchaser. They ran an apothecary shop in the nicer part of Area 14. Since almost no one can afford doctors or an RN, apothecaries are our healers or crunch heelers. My father got to know my mother, for they were in the same groping she was not all X you see, she was upper in her class for part 2.

She was banished from her mom and dad doing this and having kids not married. She is like one present of us-

comparable to what is in his bloodline. She must have really loved him to leave her home for the Ridge. For the reason that on her hunts she would occasionally collect medicinal herbs Elody is good with her hands, even the boys say that when we were all together living free, to a point, and sell those to her shop to be brewed into medications.

All she ever wanted was a lover and she has even told me what was in her romance dreams, like walking through them, with her, their race. Loads of kissing, fleshly playing, and lusting! I never had anything like that... thus far I want too. I try to evoke that when all I can see is the lady who sat by, blank and out-of-the-way, while her children turned to the skin, bones, and rot. I try to excuse her for my father's wishes. Nevertheless, to be truthful, I personally not the merciful type, on like my sister.

My sister's day in the days before this- bathing in a tub of warm water waits for me. and I scrub off her off all the dirt, water hard to find so I would have to be in there with her, and to get all the sweat from the woods of all with all the grim, and even wash my hair and her which only happens once a week. Let's put your hair up, too,' she says. I let her towel-dry it

and two braids it up around head back into a ponytail. I can hardly recognize myself in the cracked mirror that leans against the wall. To my surprise, my mother has laid out one of her own lovely sundresses for me and one for her with A soft pink matching shoes- new there were days where we did not have anything on is feet.

Plus, that was the same day they kick down the doors and said- we belong to them. You look beautiful, she was not a little girl with this look. And nothing like myself,' I say. I hug her because I know these next few hours will be terrible for her.

Her first reaping. She's about as safe as you can get since she's only entered once. I wouldn't let her take out any tesserae. Likewise, she's worried about me. That the unthinkable might happen. I protect Elody in every way I can she knows that, Likewise, then I'm immobilized against the earning. The tormented I always feel when she's in pain or fearful, she balls up lags to her chest and threatens to register the bad thoughts.

Nocked like in the rocks up and over.

Starting this place, we are invisible Likewise, have a clear view of the valley over to the tower, which was is teeming with summer life even if we were regulated, the girl in summer was socking sunlight dance in the streets with fire-higdon's blasting water.

The day's war glorious before all hell was unleashed on my mind, with a blue sky like my sister's eyes and soft breeze like her hair tickling my face.

There's never been anything romantic between her and a boy until this last week unlike me. And although he was only two years older, so I feel like it was harmless for what I would and she would get out of it, he already looked like a man strong in all the places. It took a long time for us to even become friends, not for her she was swooning fast, to stop haggling over every trade and begin helping each other out.

When they came up with a more efficient system that transported the coal directly from the mines to the trains, we get on to go to this place up at the capital.

Were up to the now- where it's- tonight. After the earning, where everyone is supposed to celebrate and love to hate and love to die with fate. As well as a lot of people do, out of relief that their children have been spared for another year. Likewise, at least two families will pull their shutters, lock their doors, and try to figure out how they will survive the painful weeks to come.

13

At six o'clock, we head for the quadrangular. Presence is mandatory except you are on death's back door. This evening, officials will come around and check to see if this is the case. If not, you'll be imprisoned. People file in silently and sign in and go to their sets. The earning is an awesome occasion for the Capitol to keep tabs on the population as well. Seven- through pre-

teen year-olds are herded into roped areas marked off by ages, the oldest in the back, the young ones, like Elody, toward the front.

Dad and mothers- and teens or family members line up around the boundary where they have to say or be shot

on the spot and some are and there are cheers, holding tightly to one another's hands.

Likewise, there are others, too, who have no one they love at stake, or who no longer care, who slip among the crowd, taking bets on the two kids whose names will be drawn. Balances are given on their ages we have too many we need to way out the overloads, were tipping the scales- if you well, the movie plays out about the story of how this all came to be...

These same people tend to be informers, and who hasn't broken the commandment laws? I could be shot on a daily basis for hunting, Likewise, the appetites of those in charge protect me. Not everyone can claim the same. Whether they're Ridge or merchant, if they will break down and weep. Most refuse to deal with the racketeers Likewise, carefully, prudently. The pre-teen that is here is the one that has already done this and live to tell about it, yet that doesn't stop them from killing you if you fight them also.

The four commandments of stars pre-teens:

A star person may not injure a human being or, through inaction, allow a human being to come to harm unless it is given the order.

A star person must obey orders given it by human trooper's beings excluding orders that would conflict with the First Law.

A Star person must protect its own existence as long as such protection does not conflict with the First or Second Law.

No sex of any nature or style identified in the populations with same-sex without given rights to pass on your race.

Yet in this tournament, all laws are off!

That's what makes this so much fun- no- Miss Lorde Dio said, sipping on her mixed drink.

As we walk, I notice Elody blouse has pulled out of her skirt in the back again and force myself to stay calm. 'Tuck your tail in, little girl to you look cute and all grown up,' I say, smoothing the blouse back in place. I glance over all face in

there wholly school uniforms all unique to their parts in this parcel, yet the same with their likewise, tons on the one side how we all have to be equal, still smoldering underneath his stony expression. Sitting next to each other at assemblies, partnering for sports activities. We rarely chat, which suits- some just like us both just fine to me if you are or not- you have to give it to get it- no? The girl is calling out one she's in my year at school. Being the mayor's daughter of all things- no one is excluded if you have some star in you, you'd expect her to be a snob, Likewise, she's all right. She just keeps to herself. Like me. Yet she may have the cone to get her replaced with someone like me.

Elody, this calling of all nights- her drab school outfit has been replaced by an expensive white dress, were the girl all have to strip in front of us boy's girls everyone sees this, seeing these girls all become what they're going to be when they change. Then her dark hair is done up with a pink ribbon by an older girl that has sieved the last war stars. Reaping clothes of per white show innocents- you have to tournament your colors and your place in this world. The boy forms the head

down shaved... and made flawless... they say it the only time is a race would look worthy.

I read into my sister's thoughts- she was thinking about her boy- Does she mean it? I question- know they were hearing this too when a thought like this was not permitted. Or is she messing with him, for the love and lust? I'm guessing the second. At the

Capitol arena looking like the warrior playground in Roman times just art-deco- white glassy and modern, yet it is the 2040's.

His eyes land small on her I see the puppy love, circular pin at her before she took foot in her dress. Real silver Likewise, tons and add-ons... Attractively crafted. 'What can you have other than your thoughts at this point when all you are in front of all of them, sure you're going to think? Five entries? The interplanetary gets tighter, more enclosed as individuals reach. The square's quite large, Likewise, not enough to hold Area 14th populace of about ten thousand.

Stragglers are directed to the adjacent streets, where they can watch the event on screens as its televised live by the state. I had six when I was just twelve years old.'

Her face becomes closed off and is looked drop like her eyes in shame when she was not a woman there was nothing to take off- the people giggled saying she still a baby. The bets are on her is she is picked- that she would die fast, boys put the money on her to not last, just like they did with me and a girl named Illiah 'Good fortune, I hear from the girl next to me- she said my this be in your erranding's.' 'You, too,' I say, and the door close and the light change form intense when on our nude bodies change to now blue. Showing is the color of whom we are... and the color we're going to die for.

The rules of the Starvation Stars are simple. In chastisement for the revolt, each of the 15 districts must provide one girl and one boy, called Likewise, to participate. The twenty-four try- Likewise, will be imprisoned in a vast outdoor arena that could hold anything from a burning desert to a frozen wasteland. Over a period of several weeks, the competitors must fight to the death. The last try Likewise, standing wins.

The result was France, a shining Capitol ringed by thirteen districts, which brought peace and prosperity to its citizens. Then became the dim days, the revolting of the neighborhoods in contradiction of the Capitol and their headmaster.

15 were defeated for this out of all of us, yet this a yearly thing the other is just knocked off my well of the powers at be, the thirteenth obliterated. The Treaty of Treason gave us the new laws to guarantee peace and, as our yearly reminder that the Dark

Days must never be repeated; it gave us the Starvation Stars. I ask why not just kill us all and be done with it, they say what is the fun in that not seeing the pain and famine for life. Taking the kids from our districts, forcing them to kill one another while having no say at all.

This is the Capitol's way of reminding us how totally we are at their sympathy and lack of it. How little unplanned we would stand of enduring another revolt. To make it embarrassing- as well as torturous, the Capitol requires us to

treat the Starvation Stars as an entertainment, a sporting event pitting every community against the others. The last honor guy alive receives a life of ease back home, and their community will be showered with awards and the right to pass on his spermatozoa and pop as many kids as he wanted with whatever preteen girl he wanted, largely consisting of food. All year, the Capitol will show the winning community gifts of grain and oil and even delicacies like sugar while the rest of us battle starvation.

The mayor steps up to the platform and begins delivering... It's the same story every year. He tells of the history of us and is parts of France, the country that rose up out of the ashes of and blood were every inch is covered. She lists the disasters, the droughts, the storms, the fires, the violating seas that swallowed up so much of the land, the brutal war for what little sustenance lingered. 'Look how they take our children away and demean them like this naked, and afraid, they kill off babies like changing underwear, if there are twins one is killed off, and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in Community Thirteen.'

Then she reads the list of past Neighborhood 14 victors. In 200 years, we have had exactly three. Only one is still alive and he stands before us for two years back. A paunchy, young man -aged man, never a girl, that is the win for the girls this year to kick ass. A girl doing this they say is impossible. Maybe so...? What would you say as a girl? Are we that weak and worthless? The crowd responds with its token applause, Likewise, he's confused and tries to give Effie Trinket a big hug, which she barely manages to fend off. Them- whatsoever words they use, the real message is clear we want to see you fight till death for us to see if you want to live on and pass your blood down, yet you'll have to lose some. 'Look how we take your children and sacrifice them and there's nothing you can do. If you lift a finger, we will destroy every last one of you. Just as we did in Neighborhood Thirteen.'

It's time for the drawing. Effie Trinket without the help of a hand- says as she always does, 'Females first!' and crosses to the goblet note with the girls' names. She goes on a bit about what an honor it is to be here, while all and sundry knows she's just aching to get bumped up to a better community where they have proper victors, not drunks who

molest you in front of the entire nation. ' Likewise, - then again there are still thousands of slips in here we see the name binging up on the wraparound walls,' I wish I could whisper to her not to think- yet that not easy to do.

Through the crowd, I spot her looking back at me with a ghost of a smile. She reaches in, digs her hand deep into the note, and pulls out a slip of paper. The crowd draws in a collective breath and then you can hear a pin drop, and I'm feeling nauseous and so desperately hoping that it's not me, that it's not me, that it's not me. As earning go, this one at least has a slight entertainment factor. Likewise, suddenly I am thinking of her all the names 100 in that big glass droplet and how the balances are in your surroundings. Not compared to a lot of the boys.

And maybe he's thinking the same thing about me for the reason that her face darkens, and she turns away.

Like it was already said-

Someone is gripping my arm, a boy from the Sam, and I think maybe I started to fall and he caught me. I feel now her berth in me like, like when I feel hard going down the steps trying to remember how to breathe, when I hit a window on wet concrete into and on a home and concerned back, unable to speak, totally stunned as the name

bounces around the inside of my cranium.

And then I see her, the blood drained from her face, hands clenched in fists at her sides, walking with stiff, small steps up toward the stage, passing me, and I see the back of her blouse has become untucked and hangs out over her skirt. Somewhere far away, I can hear the crowd murmuring unhappily as they always do when a twelve-year-old gets chosen because no one thinks this is fair. It's this detail, the untucked blouse forming a ducktail, which brings me back to myself.

I scream out Elody was one slip of paper in thousands! There must have been some mistake here there must be. I wanted to replace her, yet I could not I would kill for doing that, that would have been rebelling and act that would

see death to you for doing. I said in the same moments, know I should not- this can't be happening... Her chances of being chosen so remote to all of us yet the love the underdog and the weak meek girl to do this, the taste of blood dripping down her vagina is what they really want. And they're going to see that too, that I would not even bother to worry about her I know she going to pull through this not as innocent little girl Likewise, come back as a crampon lady. She will be deflowered just trying to stay alive with all the boys that she needs to give her what she needs and that is food and warmth and housing with them. A girl is just not as strong as a boy that all say... Hadn't I done everything? On stage no- Elody was singled out for her age, and virginity- STRIP! NAKED! OR DIE! We all gasped, yet some said it's happened before to country Likewise, I see her pink and white kiddie undies moving to down she is reluctant, yet has to do this... I nor she doesn't have to worry about a boy popping vagina open, a toper already it with his finger ripping hard and fast she cry and it bloods out saying we cannot have you be a little girl.

He licks the blood off his finger with his lips
snickering, she will always be remembered for this... and I was
the one to take her.

16

Anywhere far away would be nice sing this all
happening, I can hear the crowd murmuring building up into an
oh, happily as they always do when a ten-year-old girl gets
deflowered in front of a crowd, gets preferred because no
one thinks this is reasonable. As well as then I see her, the blood
drained from her hands, face tightened in fists at her sides,
walking with stiff, small steps up toward the stage, passing me,
and I see the back of her blouse has become untucked and
hangs out over her skirt yet again I did not say anything about it
in my mind for her to hear.

'Elody!' I don't need to shove through the crowd.
The other kids make way proximately allowing me a straight
path to the platform of the stage. I reach her just as she is about
to mount the steps. With one sweep of my arm, I push her
behind me.' Elody!' The strangled cry comes out of her throat,
and I saw that her muscles begin to move again as I was giving

her the stench, yet I knew soon that would change with the shout me out and off for her mind and thoughts with a microchip in my arm the run to my mind using sound waves.

'Lovely!' says Effie Trinket. ' Likewise, then again I have faith in there's a small matter of familiarizing the acquiring winner... There's some confusion on the stage, as all of her mind chatting devices is ripped out of her body. The rule is that once a try Likewise, the name has been pulled from the ball, another eligible boy if a boy's name has been read, or girl if a girl's name has been read, no one can move forward to take his or her place. In some districts, I feel this would want not to be so, yet that life here- in which winning the reaping is such a great honor, people are eager to risk their lives, the volunteering is complicated. Nonetheless, in Community 14, where the word byline is pretty much equal to the word corpse, volunteers are all Likewise, extinct.

Elody is earsplitting shrieking boisterously in front of me. She runs off the stage, naked as the day she was born as her dress slips as she trips some. Not caring about anything other than me. She's wrapped her skinny arms around me like a vice. 'No! No! You can't go home with me; you have to go and

maybe have a chance at winning- you could do this you know- I believe in you- remember that!'

I swallow this hard... 'Elody, let go or they well... No-' I say harshly not wanting to be that way, for the reason that this is disconcerting me, and I don't want to

cry. When they televise the replay of the earning tonight, every person will make note of my tears or, they marked as an easy target for the gun team. Acknowledging applause, I stand there unmoving while they take part in the boldest form of dissent they can manage. Silence. Which says we do not agree. We do not condone. All of this is wrong.

A weakling. I will give no one that satisfaction. 'Let go!' I can feel someone pulling her from my back. I turn and see Gale has lifted My sister off the ground and she's thrashing in his arms. 'Up you go, girl,' I say, I hear the voice fighting off the crying to keep stable, and then she is carried off toward the back was a door open without a sound. I steel myself and climb the steps down to the hose with my mom's head in my chest panicking.

(Back)

Just like my father, Elody, who no one can help loving. Was the one that I say living out her life as a helper of others, not killing them, that is why she was chosen for this?

Then to some degree, unexpected happens. At least, I don't suppose it for the reason that I don't think of area 14 as a place that cares about her. I have become someone precious to her and that was looking out for her yet I can't ever do that, in my heart I knew she was a goner. Yet I would not let her feel that I have the options. It is an old and rarely used gesture of our area, sporadically seen at funerals. It means thanks, it means admiration, it means goodbye to someone you love. Now I am truly in danger of crying, I know this... she is yet they what to see her fight to the death, for she was picked. Not allowed yet there giggling at her for this... I knew she would be strong- surprisingly strong for such a wreck. 'Look at her.... Look at this one! They were saying she's just a baby! Easy meat!'

They bring them all back out after they all cool down... like an encore... All the names have been called out I could not even hear them like... it was not important.

All the boys and all the girls... they're all standing there all have their own ways, and their own personalities, yet none-stand out as much as she.

He can't think of the word for a while- a man said- he releases me and starts for the front of the stage. He shouts, pointing directly into a camera. 'I like her!' His breath reeks of homemade whiskey, I have done run for him, and it's been a long time since he's bathed. I know how to be a boot lager. Running at night only for it its illegal. Then he adds in the camera- 'Boldness I would bang her Likewise!' he says triumphantly. 'More than you any other girls up there or in this assembly, this is why the picked here- she's pretty! - and that makes us want to fight for her battle.'

'Lots in her dreaminess... he was...' He's disgusting, Likewise, I'm grateful she was grossed out Likewise, was think that was sweet even so... she too nice... some said. They then did an up close shot of her with her hands laced her eyes dropped chin tucked left, and wiggle- dancing with her arms V-ed inform of her hips to her shy ways. Camera gleefully trained and drop to her eyes and they get the upshot blue eyes

glittering- lips wet to her peal face- cheeks shift pink, and she looked up with her eyes rolled to the top head down still.

She was biting her lip on the left side, looking like she was doing the pee-pee dance like is she looks downward it would all go away. I put my hands behind my back and stare into the distance, and make a hand sing, that only she would get so she would feel okay and safe. Eloy the smallest of us all really- we asked where she came from never growing in height since that age- she is 3 foot 8 inches- she is so small look five next to all these others that tower over her.

Even I tower over her at 5 foot.

17

Their numbers were clearer to me than their names...

All boys started with BS- something...

All the girls were G- S- something...

Long runs of numbers like a barcode...

Ezrah Everett- was the boy's name that was called out a boy that my sister played with for a lot of years before this all happen, yet we are getting used to this, it's been going on now for ages, it's just now we have a new evil like a leader that want massacres... it's not just seeing as fight and die that was the old ways, now it's just pop anyone of she wishes just with a smile and bat of an eye- there died.

The boy Ezra- Oh, no she said- starting to think about him as a love interest- they read her thoughts I knew it I said, I think- this is sick- they want her to lose her boy crush, or see what could be. Not him... she yelled- I have never spoken directly to this boy Likewise, I feel close to him for how he looked and held her to him- in play or not there was a spark there. I watch him as he makes his way toward the stage. 6 feet five inches in height, solid build, coal black hair that falls in waves over his almost hitting the back of his neck all combed back not too long yet not short. Big brown eyes that change gold in the sunlight.

There were no odds here in the names draw- it was the thought of this kids- and what they did not want to see happen. Their worst nightmare- would be- and then they do it

to be prominent. Kill your crush for example and if you don't someone is going too. That the sport here- killing what you love. The shock of the moment is registering on his face was seeing her having the same look of heart hitting the floor and back up, you can see his struggle to remain emotionless with her loss in hope feeling as he had, Likewise, his brown eyes show the terror, like I have seen so often in prey on the hunt for deer and others large or small tournament.

He is now large tournament- a moving target- fun someone in the group doesn't just pop him off now- oh they can't we all lost our gun to the government- Elody got hers back just for this event only. All the troopers in blood red, black and gray uniforms- they use our own shit to kill us with- nice right- helpless are we. Yet that was the overturn that took place.

Here are her uniform blue and white... that has chevrons on the front also there is her logo- and nameplate, and it shines in the light- with are cobalt color that fades into navy blues. They have already made up... each uniform shows their colors, from their parts- unique to their towns. With a symbol that is all, there's too. Elody is the Blue Bird, with the guns crisscrossed in the back. So-o they knew there was no

randomness here or so they want us to think- I am not that dumb- some are though.

A uniform with nothing underneath where if she takes the top off she is topless, no bras for to be far she doesn't need one- they find this funny too, for these things a wool, and you can't sleep in that way, so girl have to run around in the nude, fun. It's all part of their sick tournament. Her hair will cover some yet not all over her chest... it all what they want to see. I sure we will see it all before the stars are over. And say if a boy can do this a girl can- farness they call it was all the same... also, there was her stuff need- like them all- a medieval archery bow in pink with pink aero- feathers which she made and sets her apart from the others...

A Winchester gun also pinks, with a white and barrel long sharp bayonets. All old technology they said adds to the guessing or waiting for what was next when you're loading and someone is running up on you, yet she is the fastest girl I have ever seen load a shot. She has a Gut hook hunting knife, to cut necks with our hands and more.

A civil war sword, with a hand guard that's a plus on her end, she says one boy cut his own hand off. I know not to shot until I can see smell their breath on my face, and not to fire until I see the color in their eyes balls. I going to put this up to a hart and pull the trigger, I don't want to Likewise, I have too.

Her dad's gun passed down that fits in a holster on her belt. Single-barrel pinfire pistol AKA thumb gun.

Brass Knuckles if needed, and she'll need them, a lot of this is a hand and kicking bloodbath. 100 areas' and a purse with all the girl things she needs- like pads that all she wanted to be what they say is far to the other girls they made sure they all had the same, for others are crapping and she well too it's all part of the tournament for the girls on the fight- the time is in control of this too in her mind, and also ammunition.

In this tournament, you can see a girl do it all- like we see everything about her life when she comes in OH's in the night before sleeping or in the marring- shits and pisses too. It's what makes it entertaining they say. I no Elody- she sprays out six times, for the bath time. So, I wonder if she will, being shy? You're going to die anyway so why not... have some good

feelings coming out of you... and so what- yet that is me not her... I am glued to the wall screens in my small one room homespun that gave to us. It's smaller than a teardrop taller, yet they say this is better all or old home were bulldozed over with all our crap inside, yet we have a screen that links to the troops.

They don't have cameras in our bathrooms or bedrooms for this fact, yet I wonder this too- for they know how sexual Elody is with her own body, not public chat that she where kiddie undies, that she is pre-pubescent, that she doesn't have a bar yet. That she loves horses, and dolls, and matching thin strap- colorful sundress, with her shoes, and fingernails. Doing her hair with soft waves and long brads, and playing outside, picking flowers in spring.

What would you do if someone was seeing you do all this I mean you have to do this right? I wonder if she will- get with him... before death?

The boy thinks about him- I know, I've seen them in the bakery, school and at my home, Likewise, one is probably too old now to volunteer he is older for her like a teenager. This

is standard, the Family devotion only goes so far for most people on earning diurnal.

(Back)

Elody- I was scared... 'I suppose now that my mother was locked in some dark world of sadness lost in here crazies'.' There was no choice, Likewise, for me to understand... At so young- Likewise, at the time, all I knew was that I had lost not only a father, Likewise, a mother as well.

Zoie- AKA the girl talking to you- hi! It has become known that my mother is crazy now lost in this madness... of being with my dad in her mind... that everyone looks down on us even more, and what they are- shit on a boot next to a doorstep. They longer care for us being a money pit on society. I grow up seeing those home kids at school, seeing them go up fast made of ply.

All white, in and out. No colors... not a worm at all so cold. Sweet, tiny girl who cried when I cried before she even knew the reason, who brushed at the sight of a boy, looking at her walking to school, whom still wet the bed some nights,

because for seeing my dad beating on my mom for hitting it before the time was done, or spending money.

He'd hated her she loved him- yet he was good to us- the money goes to the kids not you for dumb shit- coal dust I tack in is not for you to blow- on dresses I need food- and the kids are starving- why. Lest just say the happy sexy time is all that keep them cheerful to us even. Not a good matchup yet he wanted her when she was younger.

The sadness, the marks of angry hands on their faces, the hopelessness that curled their shoulders forward. I could never let that happen to Elody. The community home would crush her like a bug. So- I kept our predicament a secret.

18

However, the money ran out and we were slowly starving to death. There's no other way to put it other then, I kept telling myself if I could only hold out, Elody turn ten on the 14th and be able to sign up for the high leaves class at school, and a working job with younger kids in the birthing rooms, that money went to me- I held it for her... I become a mom, I have

the hunter's job... getting food and seeing that she has what she needs. I see that she is bathed, brush her hair, and teeth things like that. I clean her dress up and hang the line.

For three days, we'd had nothing, Likewise, boiled water with some old dried mint leaves I'd found in the back of a cupboard. Elody- I remember the rain showers had waterlogged through my sister's lager coat, leaving me chilled to the bone. By the time the market closed I was there seeing if I could beg for money and food also playing the guitar, all blue fade into white, somewhat worn with gray shown some on the back and neck, it has a defeat tall paces, something I don't get... yet it a Gibson, it looks crappy yet sounds okay to me and most worm when the days are so cold and you have to be by a barn burl to stay warm, I get an amp out of a dumpster by my home were this Gibson was too. Blue binding, I have my logo on the back with my number- my name, and my life story on it.

And that is the saying-

Love is foolish with the one you want to be what to not be- to some like me I have to see, the tournament of warfare not far not too careful, they see me fight, in their sight,

day and night, is this right? The height of love is the death at the end what is lasting. I will be remembered like the bluebird in flight- see my tears as they dry- going high- either way like a rattle that does not matter:

'Besides- my yearning for the balances of life always be in your erranding. Nothing more nothing less.'

I was shaking so hard I dropped clothes in a mud puddle when I saw the firing line 100 man and 80 girl's all blast all at once babies too and little kids they ran the was shot in the handgun above the nose, for not giving in... they form part 15 no longer a town at all. I didn't pick it up for fear I would keel over and be unable to regain my feet. Besides, no one wanted those clothes. And then they would stop to reload their colts, and fire them empty one girl was naked, no more than three, and I saw her run and fall to a trooper.

I named her Laina she had no name just a number, I don't know what it was about her- Likewise, I had to see she was remembered, yet like all the others she either went to the mass graves. Where I saw them just tossed her in like trash with all the other nude bodies young and old alike. I will most like be

eaten by something wild in the woods when this all goes down...
I don't see why it any different than this- may be better. I
wonder if I should just take the gun now and end it before it
starts- only one thing stops me... and that is the faith of young
adoration. OR I WOULD...! I have it here at my temple- why the
hell not right? I try yet I

can't do this...

I can't...

I can't...

I can't...

I squeeze my eyes thigh... I can't... they taunt me
too... in my mind look in my penitentiary sterol- like room
awaiting my task the next day where I will have it all- or so they
say- I ask why to bother. There cute about it to giving us things
to end it before it starts... to see if they can crack you. It's my
last big meal- might as well rub it in- fun- they no we're not
going to eat- that we cannot hold it- yet we starved up to this
point- yet that the point to play with us to Freak- with us.
Thinking about the hell week to come- this is why...?

Elody- I remember crawling into bed, and fell into a dreamless sleep, yet fearful all feeling like I was gun down or chased by someone. It didn't occur to me until the next morning that the boy might have burned the bread on purpose. Might have released the loaves into the flames, knowing it meant being punished, and then delivered them to me. The boy all the time would glance my way, Likewise, I was watching him not letting him see that I was. Because of the bread, because of the red weal that stood out on his cheekbone. What had she hit him with? My dad never hit us yet mom was the bitch. I couldn't even imagine if- she was that in more than one way. You get that...?

The boy took one look back to the bakery as if checking that the coast was clear, then, his attention back to bread in my direction. The second quickly followed, he was in the room over the way they made sure we could see one another yet not be with each other beforehand- just part of-

the tournament they play, closing the kitchen door tightly behind him.

Zoie- I remember- I reached out to Elody and she climbed on my lap when she was seven, her arms around my neck, and head on my shoulder. Like- she did when she was a toddler; like she did the night before.

I remember- My mother sits beside me and never hugging her arms around us. For a few minutes, we say nothing. Then I start telling them all the things they must reminisce to do so, now that I will not be there to do them for them. Yet for her news she never really was... just so you know mom!

The take out's- When I am done with teachings about energy, and staying in school homework, and stop turning in o my mother. I calm down for the night after seeing her off- thinking about the times- I'd don't bother suggesting Elody learn to hunt for I'd never thought she would be the one. She has no background in killing, only seeing- I tried to teach her a couple of times and it was catastrophic- she feels on her Likewise, and got hurt- I said- no more. The sticks horrified her, and whenever I shot something, she would get teary, and talk about how I cute it was not to do that- we have to live I said. We might be able to heal it if we got it home soon enough- not understand it was not

moving anymore- so I distillate on that too- like what's she going to do here? Lay- there and die...?

I have to be a babysitter- I cannot cock out on the flames and leave Elody on her own to run free- I knew she would get lost like a puppy. There's no me now to keep you both alive if I don't do this and I am only one girl here too. It doesn't matter what happens- to her I would never forgive myself- whatever you see...

Parting words- You have to assure me you'll battle!' My voice a whisper not to draw attention- that she may not be the best one in the call outs. The fear I abandonment- felt was solid and vice-versa. I pull her arm from my grasp, moved out of the holding room. 'I was sick feeling, I could have treated myself if I'd had the medicine- yet I can buy that stuff- you deal with it.'

That is life- 'OH- JUST

DEAL WITH IT!'

20

Clasping my hands to her face... holding in like- so tiny 'You have to take the fight and do- all that I do for you on

your own you think you can do that- umm- hum- she whispered softly and thoughtfully- looking up at me towering over her, too. You're so fast and brave. Maybe you can win- you could you know- you could get this- do it for me. 'I've seen her carried off by them- the troopers- kicking and screaming like a newborn. Suffering from immobilizing sadness since- I see her on the screens we all do like an animal- locked in the pound. Perhaps it is a sickness of the kiss of death- the last kiss- to be given by me to her, Likewise, it's one we can't afford. Her- she was my world- my... everything- I can't win said- Elody- you must know that in her heart. The competition will be far beyond my abilities. Kids from wealthier districts, where winning is a huge honor, who have not been trained for... you whole life I never did this for you- and now I have to kick myself for not- you understand this...?

Boys- don't trust them all- go with your gut and in here she points- to her head and heart. Those all see them they, not your friends don't let them be- they are two to three times your size, don't be intimidated- you know that word right- Um- hum she said. This one girl girls over her she looks of too show with her eyes- not to scare you- she who knows 50, unlike ways

to kill you with a blade. Oh, there'll be people like me, too. People to weed out before the real fun begins. She threw a knife into a five-year-old- a dead girl walking- it hit her in the left eye- at trials killing her- they use real kids here at this so you're going to have to not care about seeing a life end. Were all a waste of a bloodline why not they said this year why not... have real targets- young helpless- kids. It's a sick youngling to see them lose a life- they say wishing form the screens- like dogs forming at moth in heat.

Her last words- 'I won't... I can't! You know I won't! Zoie, it repeats over and over in my brain- 'He says, and they yank us apart and slam the door, and I'll never know what it was he desired me to evoke. It's a little ride from the Evenhandedness-

Building to the 1920's train station. I've never been in a car before a mostly would and black truck- that looks like it out of the 1921 mostly world cars are a thing of the past now- yet I get to have this- must if all ride rail.

Elody- car's- Seldom even ridden in motor carriages. In the ridge, we travel on foot- or rail- most don't

have the money to have nice things, and if they did, they were overturned. I have seen a few puttering around yet never in one... they bring in the food for the rich and the rich are the one that has the most- buying the troopers off. I see the same year of a truck going down the brick, fire-engine color red, running after the blazes dinging a bell. I've been right not to cry about all this yet I could not hold it in. The station is swarming, now- I knew really- with reporters are in my face I shy away- I don't want the spotlight with their insect-like cameras trained stanchly on my face as I make my way over the height bridge in the world.

Nevertheless, I've had a lot of exercise at wiping my face clean of emotions with all the death I seen. I catch a hint of myself on the television screen over the way the giggle at that- look I made- on the wall that's an expression my influx lives and feel content that I seem almost fearful. If I'm going to cry, now is the time to do it. By morning, I'll be able to wash the damage done by the tears on my face. Nonetheless, there were lots of tears too come. I'm too tired yet not too numb to cry. The only thing I feel is a desire to be somewhere else.

So, I let the train rock me into oblivion. I put the see-through lacy outfit back on that they give us to sleep in, just slightly crumpled from spending the night on the floor rocking.

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Time to move the said- there- and passed- on and off- the train finally begins to slow and suddenly bright light flood the compartment. I run to the window to see what we've only seen on television, the Capitol, the ruling city. The cameras haven't lied about its splendor. If anything, they have not quite captured the magnificence of the glistening buildings in a white and gray and blue glass hues that tower into the air. The people begin to point at us eagerly as they are recognizing an honor girl train rolling into the city.

I step away from the window, sickened by their excitement, knowing they can't wait to watch us die. I see the boy I like over in his car- he holds his ground not being all into me yet I could tell he was, actually waving and smiling at the gazing crowd. He only stops when the train pulls into the station, blocking us from their view I blow him a kiss- no one saw...

Yesterday to say my final goodbyes to my one girlfriend Samee and family. Nevertheless, that's a dark and creaky thing that moves like a snail and smells of sour milk. The walls of this elevator are made of crystal so that you can watch the individuals on the ground floor shrink to ants as you shoot up into the air. I look over the city it just what you would think it looks like- all big and glass-ie. Say hello to your new home for a week- The Training Center has a tower designed exclusively for the honors girls. This will be our home until the definite Stars begin. Each community has an entire floor. You simply step onto a silo and press the number of your district.

Bed- I kick off my shoes and climb undertaking it all off that how I sleep or I can I have to do this- I play with the hood and fall fast asleep- it's a girl thing- the covers over me I see nothing Likewise, that boy in my tight eyes. The shivering hasn't stopped. Perhaps the girl doesn't even remember me. Nonetheless, I know she does. You don't forget the face of the person who was your last hope. I pull the covers up over my head as if this will protect me from the redheaded girl who can't speak. Likewise, I can feel her eyes staring at me, piercing through walls and doors and bedding. I wonder if she'll enjoy

watching me- over there- like she would be killing her or the other way around- we share this room now.

2 girls in a small room. They want to see if we're going to kill before the time! Then I'm overwhelmed in light-yellow foam that I have to scrape off with a heavy bristled brush. Oh, well. At least my blood is flowing. Slowly, I drag myself out of bed and into the shower. I arbitrarily punch Likewise, tons on the control board and end up hopping from foot to foot as alternating jets of icy cold and steaming hot water assault me. I put my hair down in the two braids down my front side. This is the first time since the morning of the reaping that I resemble myself. No fancy hair and no fancy clothes yet mostly lacy to see if you have

cuts or packing hidden stuff, no flaming capes. Just me. Looking like I could be headed for the woods. It calms me.

I'm nervous about the training. There will be a week of this the first days in which all the star girls practice together with the targets of killing life.

On the last evening, we'll each get a chance to achieve in isolated before the star-makers. The thought of

meeting the other star's uncompromising makes me nauseous. I turn the roll I have just taken from the basket over and over in my hands, Likewise, then my famine is gone only the famine of blood to kills is all I need now.

Not- Not- Not ME! It's them making ME!

The chatting- I try to focus on the talk, which has twisted to our interview clothes, I do okay they say I need to talk more they say- yet she is cute. We all shower together us girls I don't like this I am shy and the look at me like meet. And what to play with me- U- No! When I open my door, the redheaded girl is collecting my United and boots from where I left them on the floor before my shower. I want to say sorry for possibly getting her in trouble earlier when I tripped on her hair walking in it's that long. The face of the redheaded girl intertwines with gory images from earlier Famine Tournament, with my mother withdrawn and unreachable, with My sister emaciated and terrified. I bolt up screaming for my father to run as the mine explodes into a million deadly bits of light.

Dawn is breaking through the windows I see it all there are no covers on the big windows yet everyone saw me

do everything on screen even shower and what I did in bed there are even cams in my fingers and under the sheets how I don't know- Likewise, I know they're- there to see me do that too.

Eat- I'd set out to tell her I was sorry about dinner. Nonetheless, I remember I'm not supposed to speak to her unless I'm giving her an order. She avoids my eyes as we make our ways to the table, gives a small nod and eats. My slumbers are filled with disturbing dreams of depth and wetness and death.

The Capitol has a misty, haunted air. My headaches and I must have bitten into the side of my cheek in the night. My tongue probes the ragged flesh and I taste blood.

The boy I like- like- I exchange a look with him. 'I don't have any secret about having the tingles down there for him, I want to lock lips at some point I feel that I have to before the end.' The end of what is that? Really what is that all about?' I've eaten enough of your squirrels, yet I don't know how to kill one- how can I kill a child?' I never thought about him eating the squirrels I shot. Somehow, I for one continuously see in your

mind's eye- himself being there I remember her saying. Not out of greed- he there for you remember. On the other hand, then again for the reason, that town families usually eat expensively Likewise, her meat. Beef and chicken and horse. I recall this... 'There's always hand-to-hand combat.

All you need is to come up with a knife, and you'll at least stand a chance. If I get jumped, I'm dead!' I can hear my voice rising in anger. I don't like to kill I remember saying... cut to now- 'You won't- mind- if it's to live! You'll be living up in some tree-eating raw squirrels and picking off individuals with arrows. You know what my Zoie said to me when she came to say goodbye as if to cheer me up, she says maybe neighborhood 14 will finally have a winner. Then I comprehended, she didn't mean me, she meant you!' said- the boy.

The boy- she's a dismissal, I know- it's my hope to look out for her- until the time comes, I can no longer.

Elody- I know he is not lying about that- I heard in his thoughts before all of this. Him- he has-, physical power that is strong and perfect tilts his eyes ever so right and his six-pack chest at me in the light- the advantage with the girls- would I be

that girl- to see the eyes shine for me- as I look at these white teeth- ever so right.

Training Center- Throw a spear- a woman said- that was teaching at the nine-year-old girl's head and kill her- kill her- if you don't you go down in your points. Spend the time trying to learn something you don't know, I remember her saying to me- going back- Weights try don't overdo and hurt your body, don't reveal how much you can lift in front of the other stars. They don't need to see that you're meeker than they, you're going to train group that is not far- it kills or they kill you without blinking- and lick you up and down to spit on it, rubbing it all in you. The plan's the same for both of you if your smart you'll get this I can't say- just think hart Elody and go with your intentions- wink.

Zoie- Learn to tie a decent knot and you your gun and to pack ammo- I do not even care about the bow much to show- that if you run out of other things you only have five aero's anyways, that are tipped in bad stuff- don't tuck the tip- K. Um hum- I say kidshly. Save showing knife for there going at that point- what you're best at until your private sessions. Are we good?' I nod- Zoie this was the day before the callouts. Don't

fire the small one unless it's deep in their left boob, and squeeze hard it will take about a day for them to die slowly- yet they back off. Don't ever panic- or you will die- don't sweat in the cold your you'll die- also.

Now night- I bite my lip and stalk back to my room, making sure he- the boy that I like- like can hear the door slam yet he sees all of me with the screen in his room and the double-sided firebox. I sit on the bed, undressing, hating him over they are doing things I don't understand, hating myself hard saying my name- for mentioning that I was feeling the same. Is it- love...?

Is this love- I see and now feel...?

As his thought was turned on to me in my mind and his by them. In my bed I feel him have this with me- and does he- it was a lovemaking moment of heightened lust. The people went nuts for us- feeling this moment, of zenith.

Pretending to be friends, the next day I hear giggles from the other girls! Talking up each other's strengths are a bond, insisting the other take credit for their abilities. Because, in fact, at some point, we're going to have to knock it off and

accept we're bitter adversaries. Stupid instruction that we stick together in training like his hand on me in the night. It's my own fault I was ripped on his too, I guess I was doing it right never did that one yet I saw it through his eyes- and mine in his- with switched like bodies at the end feeling, and seeing within and out, for telling him he didn't have to coach us disjointedly.

Nevertheless, that didn't mean I wanted to do everything with him today so they can see the crematory- of a puppy- the love they call it. He was all into me not letting his hand off me and not stopping them from his hands feeling me up down the uniform. Yah

I had a hand full of Likewise, - so did he- cute right!

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I hear his voice in my head- saying cute things. She has no idea- over there that this is what she was thinking about. Although along with what she needed to know. I made sure she knew what not to hear- and see- in training... for she is the girl, I picked to work with as a team. The effect she can have on him is a lot some say he not thinking clearly to learn to fight- that he'll pass fast- daydreaming of her- ha, that is what they think he

said- in his thoughts. Visibly they meant to degrade me and him.
-Right? Likewise, a tiny part of me phenomena if this was a
praise. That he meant I was interesting- in some way.

It's almost ten p.m. I clean my teeth and smooth
back my hair again. Anger temporarily blocked out my
nervousness about meeting the other teams, Likewise, now I
can feel my anxiety rising once more. I catch myself biting my
nails.

Late night- It's weird, how much he's noticed me
from within and out. Alike with the kindness- he's paid to my
hunting- over the years- um like was not enough. Besides
deceptively, I have not been as oblivious to him as I imagined,
moreover. I have kept track of all of this in my beep mind they
said.

Blood spatter- off with youngling's heads- let the
bodies hit the floor- let the young bodies hit the floor! DEATH! I
look around at the Career girls who are showing off, obviously
trying to intimidate the field. Then at the others, the
malnourished, the incompetent, shakily having their first
educations with a knife or an ax. They walk up and we show off

with them having to in programmed in their mind to die- they even so sick to ask for it. 100 girls under 10 knocked-off in less than 30 minutes... Only five low-class boys hurt not all killed.

The doors open into an enormous gymnasium filled with various weapons to practice with- you in the fight we only have what we had at are homes- so if you have an Ak-47 good for you- I don't- far no- yet that's not what this is about- it's about blood falling to floor!

I move on to the obstacle courses. The actual training rooms are below the ground level of our building- and in the night lit fields. With these elevators going in and out with them in control- yet again, the ride is less than few a moments. Although it's not yet nine in the morning were here all day today, we're the last ones to arrive.

The other stars are met in a tense circle like a dojo- it's about respect to the past- twisted in their tournament.

My man and I are the only two dressed alike. As soon as we join the circle, the head trainer, a tall, Experts in each skill will remain at their positions, a sporty female named steps up and begins to explain the training agenda she towers

over me not him though. Some of the stations teach survival skills, others fighting techniques. We are forbidden to engage in any combative exercise with another try Likewise. There are assistants on hand if we want to practice with a partner. We will be free to travel from area to area as we choose, per our mentor's instructions. 'Suppose we tie some knots,' I say, they all giggle- like I am retarded! He said it was cute...! Is that all that matters?

We pass an unfilled post where the trainer seems satisfied to have schoolchildren. You get the feeling that the knot-tying class is not the Starvation stars burning spot. When he apprehends, I know something about snares, he shows us a simple, excellent trap that will leave a human competitor dangling by a leg from a tree- now outside in the fields barricaded in with high walls- all white. And bright lights...We concentrate on this one skill for an hour until both of us have mastered all that is needed. Then we move on to concealment. He genuinely seems' to enjoy this station, twirling a combination of mud and clay and berry juices around on his pale skin, weaving disguises from vines and leaves.

The instructor who runs the concealment position is full of passion for his work- yes some are just A-holes.

23

(Back)

The crescent moon roll dotted with seeds from Community 13. Somehow, although it's made from the same gear as I walk to 14, it looks a lot more mouthwatering than the horrible drop biscuits that are the standard fare at home. I had to get something- didn't I?

Playing with him- We both give a somewhat convincing laugh and ignore the stares from around the room. I tried breathing- my face lost- as I recall the event, a Permitted story, in which I'd stupidly defied a black bear over the rights to a skep. My boy is laughing and asks questions right on cue.

He's much better at this than I am at that too- so cute, right? On the second day, while we're taking a shot at spear throwing, he whispers to me all sweet thing and nothing. 'I think we have a shadow of me now.'

I throw my spear, which I'm not too bad at actually if I don't have to throw too far, and see the little girl from Community 1 standing back a bit, watching us. She's the ten-year-old, the other one that is really small yet not as petite as me in stature. Up close she looks like a lost school girl- walking in a playground. She has optimistic, dark, eyes and lustrous skin and stands tilted up on her toes with her arms slightly extended to her sides, as if ready to take wing at the smallest amount sound. It's impossible not to think of a bluebird.

I bite my lip. Permitted is a small yellow flower that grows in the Field. Leah. My sister Rose. Neither of them could tip the scale at seventy pounds soaking wet.

(Thinking back, I was...)

Cut ripped out into reality- I pick up another spear while my boy throws one that I gave him. 'I think her names is Leah,' I say softly. I remember her some...

My heart sinks... Almost all of the boys and at least half of the girls are bigger than I am, even though many of the tries Likewise, have never been fed properly. Kids- You can see it in their bones, their skin, and the hollow look in their eyes.

Now that I know she's there, it's hard to ignore, that I am the youngest child in the room. She slips up and joins us at different stations. Like me, she's clever with plants, climb swiftly, and has good aim. She can hit the target every time with a slingshot. What is a slingshot against a 225-pound male with a sword that going to get her...? Oh, yeah this is all she has to fight with- far right? NO!

I read down the list of the skill from stations I was part of, my eyes can't help flitting around to the others. It's the first time we've been collected, on level ground, in simple clothes. The exceptions are the kids from the wealthier districts, the volunteers, the ones who have been fed and trained throughout their lives for this moment. I may be smaller naturally, Likewise, overall my family's ingenuity has given me an edge in that area.

The slight benefit I held coming into the Training Center, my fiery entrance last night, seems to disappear in the attendance of my opposition. The others were jealous of us- I knew- he knew, Likewise, not for the reason that we were astounding since our graphic designer and a team like the makeup guys were. That what us to look that part and all.

About- It's technically against the rules to train to try Likewise before they reach the Capitol Likewise, it happens every year. The meat and plants from the woods combined with the exertion it took to get them have given me a healthier body than most of those I see around me.

Now I see nothing Likewise, contempt in the glances of the Career trying Likewise. Each must have fifty to a hundred pounds on me.

In area 14, we call them the occupation acknowledgments or just the careers. In addition, like as not, the

champion will be one of them. They project arrogance and prominently. I stand straight up, and while I'm thin, I'm strong. The tri Likewise, from 1, 2, and 7 conventionally have this look about them.

When Alla releases us, they head straight for the lethal tall stick- with a gold spoon up her Likewise, is looking over all the weapons in the gym and handle them with ease.

I'm thinking that it's lucky I'm a fast runner when he nudges my arm and I jump yet in a good way. He is still beside me- his expression is sober- yet loving to me only.

Moving on- 'Where would you like to begin?' When we finally escape to bed on the second night with me, he mumbles that were not getting any sleep, I make a sound that is somewhere between a snort and a laugh, saying okay- I want what I want- so let give them a late-night show to see- Then catch myself doing more than ever with him. It's messing with my mind too much, trying to keep straight when we're supposedly friends, not full-on lovers at this age- yet age is nothing to them or us at this point- we have sex all night! Then when we're not ready for all this we no- yet we got it all down and in and out, to say the least. Bang! Bang- bang- bang- bang! You know exactly with happen by that! Done! Aww- okay put it back in- We even broke the bed! At I'll know where we stand with the folks seeing this- we have fans big time.

'Let's pretend there's no one around- and keep on keep'n on with this.' 'God not so fast and hard'- I no- take it- I said riding even hard for that to go- you have too-

'Well- uh,' he said- you're good I say. Um-mm we said together, and I got the O!

Next to seeing all the wannabes! Seeing all the ass with cams! - I am sick of this I didn't sleep last night- crank yes, after that, we only talk in front of people- about how I got plowed- and then frogged him after- and went for the good night kiss too- and my love life at nine years old. Crap- They start to call our numbers us out of lunch, for our cloistered sessions with the tournament makers. The area by region, first the girl, then the boy.

As usual, Community 14 is slated to go first- for I am the youngster here they call me. We linger in the dining room, unsure where else to go. No one comes back once they have left. As the room empties, the pressure to appear friendly lightens. By the time they call Leah, we are left alone. We sit in quiet until they summon my lover to come. He rises- with my hand in hand.

'Thanks. I will,' he says. 'You- Shoot straight.'

I nod. I don't know why I said anything at all. Although if I'm going to lose, I'd rather with him win than the others.

Better for our district, for my mother and My sister.

After about fifteen minutes, they call my name. I smooth my hair, set my shoulders back, and walk into the gymnasium. Instantly, I know I'm in trouble. They've been here too long, the Tournament Makers. Sat through twenty-three other demonstrations. Had too much to wine, most of them. Want more than anything to go home.

There's nothing I can do Likewise, continue with the plan. I walk to the archery station. Oh, the weapons!

I've been itching to get my hands on them for days! Bows made of wood and plastic and metal and materials I can't even name. Arrows with feathers cut in flawless uniform lines. I choose a bow, string it, and sling the matching quiver of arrows over my shoulder.

There's a shooting range, Likewise, it's much too limited. Standard bull's-eyes and human silhouettes. I walk to the center of the gymnasium and pick my first target. The dummy used for knife practice. Even as I pull back on the bow I know something is wrong. The string's tighter than the one I use at home. The arrow's more rigid. I miss the dummy by a couple of inches and lose what

little attention I had been commanding. For a moment, I'm humiliated, then I head back to the bullseye. I shoot again and again until I get the feel of these new weapons.

Back in the center of the gymnasium, I take my initial position and skewer the dummy right through the heart. Then I sever the rope that holds the sandbag for boxing, and the bag splits open as it slams to the ground. Without pausing, I shoulder to roll forward, come up on one knee, and send an arrow into one of the hanging lights high above the gymnasium floor. A shower of sparks bursts from the fixture.

It's an excellent shooting. I turn to the Tournament Makers. A few are nodding approval, Likewise, the majority of

them are fixated on a roast pig that has just arrived at their banquet table.

Suddenly I am furious, that with my life on the line, they don't even have the decency to pay attention to me. That I'm being upstaged by a dead pig. My heart starts to pound, I can feel my face burning. Without thinking, I pull an arrow from my quiver and send it straight at the Tournament maker's table. I hear shouts of alarm as people stumble back. The arrow skewers the apple in the pig's mouth and pins it to the wall behind it. Everyone stares at me in disbelief.

'Thank you for your consideration,' I say. Then I give a slight bow and walk straight toward the exit without being dismissed.

As I stride toward the elevator, I fling my bow to one side and my quiver to the other. I brush past the gaping Avoxes who guard the elevators and hit the number twelve landed on with my fist. The doors slide together and I zip upward. I actually make it back to my floor before the tears start running down my cheeks. I can hear the others calling me

from the sitting room, Likewise, I fly down the hall into my room, bolt the door, and fling myself onto my bed.

Then I really begin to sob.

Now- I've done it! Now I've ruined everything! If I'd stood even a ghost of a chance, it vanished when I sent that arrow flying at the Tournament makers. What will they do to me now? Arrest me? Execute me? Cut my tongue and turn me into an Avex so I can wait on the future stars of Panel?

What was I thinking, shooting at the Tournament makers? Unquestionably, I am situated, I was shooting at that apple, for the reason that I was so angry at being overlooked. I wasn't trying to kill one of them yet I want so- to do that. If I would have, I would be dead fast!

Oh, what does it matter? It's not like I was going to win the Tournament anyway. Who cares what they do to me? What really scares me is what they might do to Zoie and me, how my family might suffer now because of my impulsiveness. Will, they take their few belongings, or send my mother to prison and me to the community home, or kill them? They wouldn't kill them, would they?

Why not? What do they care? I myself should have hung around and ask for forgiveness. Otherwise chuckled, like it was a big pun. Then maybe I would have found some compassion. Likewise, then again instead, I followed out of the place in the worst- mannered manner conceivable.

I shout for them to go away and eventually they do. It takes at least an hour for me to cry myself out. Then I just lay curled up on the bed, stroking the silken sheets with my hood, feeling him run through and out of me- watching the sunset over all the land- they all could see in and the cam was flaking it red light- right down where you could see my pinkie-kitty. That's what they asked for when sending in money for me to get sponsors. Being cute and hot sales to them- that what I was whispered in my mind by him over the way to his room.

In the early parts of the day at the stars, before that though, they'll give me a score so low, no one in their right mind would sponsor me. That's what will happen tonight. Since the training isn't open to viewers, the Tournament makers announce a score for each player. I expect guards to come for me. Nevertheless, as time passes, it seems less likely.

I calm down. They still need a girl - from constituency 14, don't they? If the Tournament makers want to punish me, they can do it publicly. Wait until I'm in the arena and sic starving wild animals on me. You can bet they'll make sure I don't have a bow and arrow to protect myself. Also- with what I said before. It gives the audience a starting place for the betting that will continue throughout the stars.

I wish the stylists hadn't shown up for the reason that for some reason, I don't like the idea of substandard them. It's as if I've tossed away all the good work they did on the opening ceremonies without a thought. I avoid looking at anyone as I take tiny spoonful's of potato soup. The saltiness reminds me of my tears. I had been anticipating my shooting skills might get me a six or a seven or more- like a ten, even if I'm not particularly powerful. Now I'm sure-

I'll have the lowest score of the twenty-five. If no one sponsors me, my odds of staying alive decrease to almost zip.

(Back)

The walk out of the town as a star the others would spit- lap- bit and rip on us thinking there were higher up than us- we did this naked as the day we came into this hellish world. The community has gotten rid of us- like trash. We are the property of them- not a farce- they don't want us here or anywhere in these parts after our time is up- unless you're the winner- then weeding us out.

The walk was long and blasting on the feet- my sister saying you'll make it back- no you won't on girl said. On the train, I sat- box cars- changed. I had to shove a tube up my ass- Likewise, - hidden way up in my ass- so far, I could feel it in my gut and they thought was poop- with 1,000 or so of currency in it. You saw me take that out- gross right! 50% of us will pass the first day- you can make it if you have the cash!

Run- there is no one or place to go- money is the way out- one cut a girl get last night to get the cash out of her. Syaga was her... she was odd, to say the least. Famine was high- in the cars where they opened them and hosed you down boy and girls alike- still naked. Sleep was hard on the cars rocking down the skinny rail tracks- feeling every bump- with eyes over the way showing- I WANT TO KILL- YOU.

Hot and cold in the blue and white cars- Steam and sound of highs over rolling hills. I was shanked on the hand, and told by Syasa she would cut my head off if I did suck on her off. The march passes us we look- making a distraction- with a cut to a face- some run for it going for the river over the way- yet they get some and smash their feet not killing them- that would be like killing a girl before banging her with yah did- just making sure they would never get away- hobbling they call it. One was shot- I didn't even know her name- yet no one gives a rat's ass. The smells of pigs and fish- rotting with humans- a head off over the way- too much- we walk into the camp are new home. Line up they yell at the head man; the drummer plays his death march.

The boy Sage is looking dumb with his mouth open.

You are- Jailers-

Rolls called out-

The first time one tries to escape at 3 years of jail time- and the right to kill you without say. 2nd adds 2 more each time.

Masturbate is a NO- something that you

should do it drains strength unless a par team.

Those that do well have- do this in front of a camera and say why they need it.

Saving is done in 5 minutes by the hands of a staffer where you can shower for 15 minutes. We march around still unclothed as they all see... I was the one that wants to see the most is all pubescent.

Boys love that... so they can see it all!

There I was... until training.

All are chained down to their bad unless in a partnership. The hospitality was high- at some ran there too- killed with high power Tommy guns.

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I got my boy fast before I went here, yet I do love him. I- he was the crunch of my life anyways- I said to them in a chat... Permitted all Leah. The rat that said they would buy you out- is Tostito- give a long run and ways out- yet into a trap. A

boy is dragging a dead girl by the hair no- still marching around to show how strong we are. I could hear the accordion music of my homeland playing in my mind as I was a week yet not stopping.

I can get you a train- he would say to them- and you would get there, and it was a rusted out 1888, with parts missing. I had no choices the one said- if I stay in this hole- I will perish! She came back hobbled and she killed herself staking her fist down her mouth.

Oh yeah- Yet not after donning these 5 times. We are going to break you! That what they said to us as we got on the train here.

Zoie- I ran after her not caring about life- I was even placed in an open jail-like room for saying something to a trooper he didn't like- where it would rain- or sun or more- no lights- bats and rats all over- I had to poop in the corner. I was sent to Demise island over in the triangle, you can see me here waking passing, I know I would not make it back to see if she is alive- yet I know I might- if I stay strong and eat all they give I

know that I can make it some- its jizz full- watery shit they give me.

When I pop my head out the steel doors. I said FU- and get my food cut ½ of what it was!! I giggled crazily in the rain coming down... and when I shit- they don't like that closing off the top with a blackout plat.

I started eating bugs... The running the crawling was nuts in the mud- and woodlands. I even jumped off 1,200 feet in the air. They would hold my head with a pipe to make me suffer- for being me. The girl that showed her what she needs to know. I look good hair falling out- I know I look okay- death not far- yet, I have to be strong for her- even if the odds are not in my favor. I rip my teeth out that were rotting. A trooper would come in every night and fondle me- I could not do anything or more time was added. He would kiss me all over too- I fought some- yet gave in to get out. I saw a girl being dragged out by their lags, for them to have a good time- I was one- and yes, we all were stripped. This is what I get just for my blood type and heritage. Used as -ho! I got tattoos; I didn't want too... covering my arms.

I get 50 more nights- for yelling at the troopers for playing with myself, yet can you not- some say they do... lies? I am failing, and I know... that's okay if it's for her to live on.

(Forward) 2 years of this I was a broken girl.

25

One was made a show- and the blade went down hard and fast- she was only five. The number, which is between one and twelve, one being irredeemably bad and twelve being unattainably high, signifies the promise of the try Likewise. The mark is not a guarantee of which person will win. It's only an indication of the potential a try Likewise, showed in training.

Frequently, for the reason that of the variables in the actual arena, high-scoring try Likewise, go down almost immediately. As well as a few years ago, the boy who won the Stars only received a three. Still, the scores can help or hurt individual stars in terms of sponsorship. I masticated that... I choose I may as well go.

The scores will be televised tonight. It's not like I can hide what happened forever. I go to the bathroom and

wash my face, Likewise, it's still red and splotchy. All and sundry waiting at the table, even Pahyai and Lattie. The adults begin some chitchat about the weather forecast, and I let my eyes meet us me and my boy. He raises his eyebrows. A question. What happened? I just give my head a small shake. Then, as they're serving the main course, I hear the reporter says, 'Okay, enough small talk, just how bad were you today?'

Somehow calling me sweetheart is off enough at this for an awe moment- that I'm at least able to speak. 'I shot an arrow at the Tournament makers to show what I can do big crowds.' Everyone stops eating when I shot to girls with one aero- as they were moving. 'You what?' The horror in Gannah's voice confirms my worst suspicions.

'I shot an arrow at them. Not exactly at them. In their direction. It's like My boy said, I was shooting and they were ignoring me and me just. I just lost my head, so I shot an apple out of their stupid roast pig's mouth!' I say defiantly.

'And what did they say?' says Cinna carefully.

'Nothing. Or I don't know. I walked out after that,' I say.

'Without being dismissed?' gasps Gannah. 'I dismissed myself,' I said. I remember how I promised My sister that I really would try to win and I feel like a ton of coal has dropped on me.

See they'd have to reveal what happened in the Training Center for it to have any worthwhile effect on the population. People would need to know what you did. Likewise, they can't since it's secret, so it'd be a waste of effort,' says Gannah. 'More likely they'll make your life hell in the arena.' 'Well, they've already promised to do that to us anyway,' says my strong brave man.' Well, that's that,' says Gannah.

Then he Likewise, terms into a roll.

'Do you think they'll arrest me?' I ask.

'Doubt it... be a pain to replace you at this stage,' says Gannah.

'What about my household...?' I say.

'Will they discipline them...?'

'Don't think so- maybe have them show the spread eagle...?

(Giggling) the many- many- people, in the stadium.

Wouldn't make much sense.

'Very Leah,' says Gannah. And I realize the impossible has happened. They have actually cheered me up. Gannah picks up a pork chop with his fingers, which makes Gannah frown, and dunks it in his wine.

He rips off a hunk of meat and starts to chuckle. 'What were their faces like?' I can feel the edges of my mouth tilting up. 'Shocked. Terrified. Uh, preposterous, some of them.' A pop into my mind. 'One man tripped backward into a bowl of punch.'

Gannah guffaws and we all start laughing except Gannah, although even she is suppressing a smile. 'Well, it serves them right. It's their job to pay attention to you. And just because you come from Community Twelve is no excuse to ignore you.' Then her eyes dart around as if she's said something totally outrageous. 'I'm sorry, Likewise, that's what I

think,' she says to no one in precise. 'I'll get a very bad score,' I say. 'Scores only matter if they're very good, no one pays much attention to the bad or mediocre ones.

My family is safe... right?

Time to go- you...d-ah...

Next time you see me- I grin at him and realize that I'm starving. I cut off a piece of pork, dunk it in mashed potatoes, and start eating. It's okay.

Plus, if they are safe- I don't feel they are, no real harm has been done- they say to me in my mind- with a snicker- that I did not like- yet what could I do about it?

I chatted with my boy he said-

'People use that tactic,' he said to me. 'I hope that's how people interpret the four I'll probably get,' says me. 'If that. Really, is anything less impressive than watching a person pick up a heavy ball and throw it a couple of yards? One more or less landed on my foot... or toe.'

After dinner, we go to the sitting room to watch the scores announced on television. First, they show a photo of the tri Likewise, then flash their score below it. Most of the other players average a six. Surprisingly, little Permitted comes up with a seven. I don't know what she showed the judges, Likewise, she's so tiny it must have been impressive. The Career Likewise, - naturally get in the eight-to-ten range.

Constituency 14 comes up last, as usual. He pulls a five, the lowest of all boy it's all the sex they giggle- so at least a couple of the Tournament makers must have been watching him. I dig my fingernails into my palms as my face comes up, expecting the worst. Then they're flashing the number eleven on the screen. Everybody is slapping me on the ass and cheering and congratulating me- on getting F-ed and going to die for not have a real man.

Nevertheless, it doesn't seem real.

'There must be a mistake- I think with the- OH SHIT look on my face. How? How- could that happen...?' I ask Gannah.

At dawn, I lie in bed for a while, watching the sun come up on a beautiful morning. It's on Sunday. A day off at home. I wonder if my sisters -is- well or not- in the woods yet, I knew that they would do something like that it came around to me.

'Elody, the girl with shy spirit,' says Jannah and gives me a hug.

Jannah is an old friend of Gannah her gay girlfriend and that not allowed either in the stars- or they would be a couple one reason, they were picked to wipe out their gay ways- a sickness as they say- just like us stars. Naughtily... they kiss- saying kill us!

And they did the next time we chatted yet they were hand and hand- and in love- or so they said. One girl said that's better than dying for Jesus... No comment- yet I have some faith.

My man- and I congratulate each other for making it this far, another awkward moment- as we make out... saying are dreams if we make it- knowing one must die- We've both done well, Likewise, what does that mean for the other? I

escape to my room as quickly as possible and burrow down under the covers. The stress of the day, particularly the crying, has worn me out. I drift off, reprieved, relieved, and with the number eleven still flashing behind my eyelids.

I had been struggling along on my own for about six months when I first ran into Bale in the woods. It was a Sunday in October, the air cool and pungent with dying things. I had spent the morning competing with the squirrels for nuts, and the slightly warmer afternoon wading in shallow ponds harvesting Elody.

26

The boy- The only meat I would shoot was a squirrel, which had practically run over my toes, in its quest for acorns, nevertheless, the animals would still be afoot; when the snow buried my other food sources. Having strayed further than afield than usual, I was speeding up back home, lugging my burlap sacks when I came across a dead rabbit. I had been trying to use snares all summer with no success, so I couldn't help dropping my sack's to examine this one.

That's risky...' My fingers were just on the wire above one of the rabbits when a voice rang out. 'It was hanging by its neck in a thin wire a foot above my head. About fourteen yards away was another.

What she said to do- 'That you can't believe a little girl from Community fourteen has done this well. The whole thing's been more than you ever could have dreamed of. Talk about my clothes. How nice the people are...? How the city amazes you... say what you love- If you won't talk about yourself, at least complement the audience. Just keep turning it back around, all right.'

I familiar with the twitch-up snares, for the reason that my father had used them. When the prey is caught, it's jerked into the air out of the reach of other starving animals. I brought it back for her- and that when the love started.

Elody- The next hours are agonizing. At once, it's clear I cannot gush. We try me playing cocky, Likewise, I just don't have the arrogance.

Apparently, I'm too 'defenseless' for ferociousness, I'm not witty, humorous, erotic, and or secretive- like you.

~*~

At the Starvation Tournament part of the Stars, at every living being in the Capitol by marvelous dishes around my room. When the girl with the rainbow hair comes in to turn down my bed, her eyes widen at the mess. 'Just leave it!' I yell at her. 'Just leave it alone!' I hate her, I never hated anyone or anything till now- too, with her knowing reproachful eyes that call me a coward, a monster, a puppet of the Capitol, both now and then. For her, justice must finally be fashionable.

Why am I letting her? At least my death will help pay for the life of the boy in the woods. Likewise, instead of fleeing the room, the girl closes the door behind her and goes to the bathroom. She comes back with

a damp cloth and wipes my face gently then clean the blood from a broken plate off my hands. Why is she doing this? She shakes her head. 'I should have tried to save you,' I whisper. Does this mean we were right to stand by? That she has forgiven me? 'No, it was wrong,' I say. She taps her lips making them wet, with her fingers then points to my chest with

her knife. I think she means that I would just have ended probably dead. When we move on...

I spend the next hour helping the girl that has taken a liking to me in a sexual is cleaning see and I's room. For sex, and to get on the good side of me- I play along not trusting her- is just sex, right?

Cleaned away is all that makes us little girls in a room, she turns down my bed. I crawl in between the sheets like a five-year-old and let her tuck me in. Then she gets in with me- and the fun starts for her- I want her to stay until I fall asleep- I never like sleep alone anyways- I always sleep with my sister. Yet she is taking time away from me and my lover- I get it so does he- to be there when I wake up. I want the protection of this girl, even though she never had mine.

In the morning, it's not the girl Likewise, my prep team who are hanging over me. I remember my lessons with my sisters in my mind.

Huge bright blue eyes, full red lips, lashes that throw off bits of light when I blink. Finally, they cover my entire body in a powder that makes me shimmer in the lights. Then

Melia goes to work on my hair, weaving strands of red into a pattern that begins at my left ear, wraps around my head and then falls in one braid down my right shoulder. The team works on me until late afternoon, turning my skin to glowing satin, stenciling patterns on my arms, painting flame designs on my twenty perfect nails. They erase my face with a layer of pale makeup and draw my features back out.

He walks in- with us two girls- 'Close your eyes girls,' he orders. Me- I can feel the silken inside as they slip it down over my stark- naked body, then the weight for his call-outs of what he wanted to do with me after he did what he wanted with her. I clutch her hand rubbing my- hand as I blindly touching my goodies, glad to find they are at least two inside. There are some adjusting and jiggling. Then silence... and the end for the first. With just the girls as he and the viewers looking!

Fuck me I yell! He crawls up, between my legs where he stops to rid me of my sodden panties. He slings it away carelessly, his eyeing eyes never leaving the bare place they covered. He continues to stare, licking his lips- obviously beyond aroused by the sight Likewise, there's nothing to hide

my intimate folds and I feel exposed, squirming and certain that my blush reaches all the way down there. He takes his sweet, torturous time - enjoying in his private viewing commotion. He makes no move to touch me Likewise, the ravenous molds his face is pushing me to run up onto him with wild desire, taking his time. I shift response with desolate moments.

With my body on top of his I stroke my hand over the sprinkling of stubble, on- easily with myself with every curve and dip of his face. You are so precious, thank you for taking another chance on me. Laying in his chest with my head- while he grips my inner thighs, pushing them apart. Keep still or I'll make you- then he kisses my lips and the other set. I gasp at his challenging threat and on pure instinct and raw desire, my hips tilt up by their own accord, crazy in its need for any contact.

My legs are bent with my knees resting on either side of his head. My bottom sits on his chest, taking my weight, which leaves my secret opening utterly gaping and vulnerable, not to mention very close to his sinful mouth. I can feel his breath on me, fluttering and making my heart stutter. His hands slip around, cupping my backside as he pushes me into him for the sex that was about to be made, inhaling deeply like what I

feel inside me. Besides what she already had. Did I care yes-
Likewise, I want to live off in the night and I need a girlfriend too
here.

27

The night before the stars- all the girls in their
fancy dress all colors and shapes. 'I have to, I'm dizzy!' I'm also
giggling, which I think I've done maybe never in my lifetime.

Likewise, the nerves and the spinning have gotten
to me. My boy- wraps a protective arm around me. 'Don't
worry, I've got you. Can't have you following in your mentor's
footsteps.' He is the one- that I love here just so you know that-
yet I a girl

I will try anything once even girls... I kissed a girl
and it was okay... I said to them passing out like... for what that
all thought it's not that bad- mom and dad it what happens with
girls this age! They're going to get Fucked- that's the times- just
ask MTV- the show and the music.

I you find this affiance stop viewing moms and
dads, I am sure your kid would say what wrong with this? There

was not much said- I am sure I no more than you do at my age in sex- like must girl my age! If you do like it go do something else- yet I assure you- which your kid will not- and say your nuts, for not letting them look at me- for there doing just what I am- and as of this year, it's right.

~*~

More chatting with the interviewers- Woot- woot is all I here as I stand there looking at them all! They like me they really like me. I swallow hard. 'She asked me to try really hard to win.' The audience is frozen, hanging on my every word. 'And what did you say?' prompts Caesar gently. Nevertheless, instead of warmth, I feel an icy rigidity take over my body.

'I bet you did,' says your lovers a, a squeeze. The buzzer goes off- saying no. My muscles tense as they do before a kill just for show that I could- Kill is okay to this world- yet saying- Fuck is not- and ripping her heart out is okay too? Yet some light sex is not I asked- they were like shocked by that one- something I should not have questioned... why? When I speak, my voice seems to have gone up an octave. 'I swore I would do this and not be right.' The all gapped- like I shouldn't

have... why? It's not the 1900's anymore or the 2000's- get what I mean- I said to them in my mind- they said to drop it. As we cut to a break.

Talk about this perfect love you have with him? His eyes his face, his body... and nothing else... don't say what you really feel I said in my mind? They didn't like that... I was not whining points for saying what I wanted and that was a boy banging me in the night- like a real girl would do. Pissed- I shyly get up that what they want a shy girl with a fake smile on her face- 'Sorry we're out of time, yet that is me- Likewise, come on here...

What do you want to see? I asked- on brake...

Death?

Lust?

Killing?

Or me?

Where are my Life and Love- come in- it's all for you, and I feel cheated- and then they said remember whom you are a nine-year star...Your dead to us either way.

They make me not me... just a program of what they want.

A heel like an applause continues long after I'm seated back with the others. I look to Sani for comfort and she looked at me like what the hell. He gives me a side thumb

as I walk to him. Sani is a boy that make sure I don't F- it up. What happens to being sweet? I said I just didn't feel like it today... Hello- I a NINE-YEAR-OLD- girl! I feel like crying!

Best of luck, Elody Elizabeth Elosteen, the star girl from region 14.'

28

I'm still in a daze... sitting through his interview. He has the audience from the get they not sure about him like- go, though; I can hear them laughing at him for not having just one girl, shouting out. He got the same question and went into great

detail about how he banged this girl- and that was okay for he is a boy... and boys can have sex with anyone and that a-okay- yet a girl is a slut- if she thinks about it.

No respect to girls at all in the tournament. Or in our lives as girls! I knew he had to say this yet I was not contented.

A shake of his head said to me to not- think about it, I was turn off to him, so I would not talk for him... There must be some special girl right what one? Come on, what's her name?' says the man in black- Um- she over there he points.

Sounds of understanding from the crowd-

Why her...?

29

'I don't know, Likewise, a none of boys like her for whom she is,' he says. 'So, here's what you do. You win, you go home. She may not be there or the other way around?' The man said discouragingly. I- I- a – don't know... oh my...!

For a moment, the cameras hold on him down
casting on his eyes as what he says sinks in. Then I can see my
face, mouth

half open in a mixture with surprise and complaint,
overblown on every screen as I realize, me... He means me...
right? I press my lips together and stare at the floor, hoping this
will conceal the emotions starting to boil up inside of me. I
never knew at that time... the girl that was shown and since I
would not look up, they never said. That was the punishment-
with head in my mind.

30

I take a shower and scrub the gold paint, the
makeup, the scent of beauty from my body. All that remains of
the design team's efforts are the flames on my nails. I strip all
that is fake and gay to me of my body rapping all the places-
that you should not see- yet you do. Brush my teeth- hair- and
the underwire is put on with PJ's until bedtime... was I slip out...
I do some reading- and see the new that I don't want to see
about everything and the world all crazy. I see the hell that we
live in and I don't want to yet they make me. There is only one

hour was there not feeling the inside of me- or hearing my every emotion.

Possibly it will give me something, to hold on to in the days to come. I pull on a thick, fleecy nightgown and climb into bed. It takes me about five seconds to realize I'll never fall asleep. And I need sleep very much, for the reason that in the arena every moment I give in to fatigue will be an invitation to death. It's no good. One hour, two, three passes, and my eyelids refuse to get heavy. I can't stop trying to imagine exactly what terrain I'll be thrown into.

Return...? Marsh...?

A frigid inhospitable- surroundings...?

Above all I am hoping for trees, which may afford me some means of concealment and food and shelter, Often- there are trees, for the cause that barren landscapes are dull glum yet awe-inspiring- and the Tournament resolve too quickly without them. On the other hands, what will the climate be like?

Questioned- What traps have the Tournament makers had burrow to liven up the slower moments? As well as then there are my fellow esteems.

The more anxious I am to find sleep, the more it eludes me. Finally, I am too restless to even stay in bed. I pace the floor, heart beating too fast, breathing hard- yet not holding it in. My room feels like a prison cell to me as I said. Worse than what I know she had- yet not at all. It's all in my mind the imprisonment. That's spooky!

The idea of being strong for someone else having never entered their heads, I find myself in the position of having to console them. Since I'm the person going in to be slaughtered, this is somewhat annoying.

I run down the hall saying, I had enough- to the door- to the roof- I went not allowed- Likewise, I am there. It's not only unlocked Likewise, ajar so how is going to stop me- I see them adding traps and things out for us- they won't know I was on me time. Something that they never thought of is how I paled all this on my time to maybe win.

The plan that they cannot get into- for I have it coded something my dad made for us when this was added in me- he said they don't need to know all of your life. My dad was somewhat of an inventor- also on this side as a hobby.

Yet there is a lot of chatting here- nothing is far in the tournament- we all play dirty- there are really no roles just kill- the one you see and Knock them out! My sisters are the one that worked for this moment not me- so what was it I got from her the day I left home this code of how to do this... just by putting my forehead to hers and scanning it all in. I want to see the sky and how the day is going to go and so on- the moon with the stars- on the last night that no one will be hunting me- that why I know where I am.

Like a compass, all I have to do is look at the time on my hand to get north now.

I knew that all I need is a piece of my hair in with a magnetically charged paperclip and I have the same thing, something I ripped off one of the desks. Along with other small things like a flint rock and the back of my knife. Smock you die for them seeing you- yet you can live without it in the bush. The

first thing you need is water- not killing... I know this they don't.

Food

I good for three weeks...

I will find what I can yet I know there is not much out there. You kill the tournament and you're going to be eaten by them at night. Your sent will kill you fast in the bush them hunting you. Tree living it's not working for me- yet some say they think that would work- I say no- two words- BIG CAT'S. we're not at the top of the food chain here- replaying is something I need to know- she did- I didn't Likewise, I have it all! Everything I need to know... for that, I will always be edited. And I think- some knew this and that's why she is where she is... Likewise, they had to see if I would make it. The what if...!

My thoughts- You know, you could live a thousand lifetimes and not deserve him. My nightmares are usually about losing you. I'm okay once I realize you're here. I realize only one person will be damaged beyond repair if he dies is- me! I'm so sorry,' I whisper. I lean forward and kiss him. I turn and put my lips close to him and drop my eyelids in imitation... 'He offered me sugar and wanted to know all my secrets,' I say in my best

seductive voice. His eyelashes flutter and he looks at me through a haze of opiates.

'Thought you'd be gone by now,' He says. He tilts his forehead down to rest against mine and pulls me closer. His skin, his whole being radiates heat from being so near the fire, and I close my eyes, soaking in his warmth. I breathe in the smell of snow dampened leather and smoke and apples, the smell of all those wintry days we shared before the Tournament. I don't try to move away.

Why should I anyway? His voice drops to a whisper. 'I love you.' That's why.

I look at him and he gives me a sad smile. I hear all of their voices. 'You could do a lot worse.' At this moment, it's impossible to imagine how I could do any better. The gift... it is perfect. So, when I rise up on my tiptoe to kiss him, it doesn't seem forced at all.

My choices are simple. I can die like a quarry in the woods or I can die here beside you now or then or forever. 'I'm not going anywhere. I'm going to stay right here- even if I not there I am in your mind and memory forever.' Always!

Always you...

Stars

31

You- I would fight for... he said to me... I wish I could freeze that moment, right here, right now, and live in it forever.'

Because I'm selfish, I'm a coward, I'm the kind of girl who, when she might actually be of use, would run to stay alive and leave those who couldn't follow to suffer and die. There nothing up her to me Likewise, stars and the moon, that's all I need to see and the treetops. I am sure they see me yet I am on my time... My feet move soundlessly across.

'It not always that I can turn my mind off,' I say- when I hear it snap on in my mind and I walking back in and her my boy's voice play softly inside. 'Thinking about your family he said?' he asks. Why would you ask me that- I said frantically question if I said far too much in my retrieving?

'No,' I admit a bit guiltily. 'All I can do is wonder about tomorrow. Which is pointless, of course.' In the light from

below, I can see his face now, the awkward way he holds his bandaged hands. 'I really am sorry about your hands.' 'It really doesn't matter, you were off for a long time it seemed to me,' he says. 'I have never- ever been a contender in these stars nevertheless.' Why did you ask me... anyways...?

I want to die as myself, to not having them plan that too, yet I feel this is all parts of their tournament.

There were just moments where I thought you were really far out there in your thoughts or so they said too. Yet it was like you just blacked out. (That what I wanted them to think. overloading everything this is in my mind.) My best hope is to not humiliate myself over this... and. 'He hesitates, all time I feel that I said too much... like I what thief to something-tacking away from him... and got away with it- like I did them I knew I could not say anything to him or they would surely get it... so wrong right?

'And what do you what to know maybe I did black out?' I say. 'I don't know how to say it exactly. How I feel about all this- my family is grown now- I no! Only me and you-you

have to take this place and be there for me- that what I need from you.

Does that make any sense to you? I ask... I shake my head, yes and he gets it, all we have at this point is each other's as we hug our own body's feel like we are hugging. How could he die like anyone Likewise, himself or as me with him- or them?

'I don't want them to change me... from the inside out. Turn me into some kind of horrid kill, which I'm not wanting to be.'

I bite my lip feeling inferior... like always in my past days of days and times of times. While I have been ruminating on the availability of trees, and look for the love to show the way- that has been struggling with how to maintain his identity as us. His purity for me is what is driving me to keep going.

I feel you! All of you now and forever! He said.

32

I locked my blue eyes into his, demanding an answer- do you love me.

Yes- truly! He said- I knew in his thought that was real.

I smile at him, sad and thrilled. Okay, be my sweetheart and kiss me on the rooftop under the stars. And we ran and did just that not caring what they said.

I will always- Then I turn and leave the roof. I spend the rest of the night slipping in and out of a dozing out, imagining the cutting remarks I will make on him to kill him out of the fact I have too in the morning of the next day. I don't want to kill this boy... I love him... can't they see that- it's sick to me and him?

~*~

There are no rules in the arena, Likewise, anthropophagy doesn't play well with the Capitol audience, so they tried to head it off. Just KILL! And see who stands as last- there is no timing- it could be one day or one year. It has happened.

The ride to me I might as well have been in a coffin,
lasts about half an hour before the windows blackout,
suggesting that we're nearing the arena.

The flying ships over hand the lands of Zarnesboro,
a and I go back to the ranking, only this time it leads down into
a cylinder subversive, into the catacombs that lie beneath the
arena. That is where it all opened up to the world, they made
for us- it's part of the land yet under them workings... up and
you're over the arced fizz of web almost virtual programed
control-ness.

The whole thing is brand- new to me- all-
everything- the land and how it looks the sent and the air
seeming thinner, a fast train moved over my head, and with
clear like tracks under it with care posts under. Fans I would say
that want to see this all for the stadium.

The only thing the same are the faces popping up
with the look of kill coming at me- there is no call out when this
stars you pop up and run.

I struggle to keep my breakfast down. We're on a flat, open stretch of ground. A plain of hard- death that is grouses to look at if you can slow down to see if- it's made to be that way for a tea's- lush Pandora is the fifth moon of the gas giant Polyphemus (both are figures in Greek mythology), which orbits Alpha Centauri A in the Alpha Centauri star system, the closest star system to our own sun. Everything glassines at the light in colors you have never seen before with your eyes.

'Why not? You saved me with those bugs. You're smart enough to still be alive. And I can't seem to shake you anyway,' I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide. 'You hungry?' I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the meat. 'Come on then, I've had two kills today.' Permitted tentatively steps out into the open. 'I can fix your stings.' 'Can you?' I ask. 'How?' She digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I'm almost certain they're the ones my mother uses.

'Where'd you find those?'

'Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,' says Leah. 'There is a lot here, too.'

'That's right. You're Area Eleven. Cultivation,' I say. 'Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you've got wings.' Permitted smiles. I've landed on one of the few things she'll admit pride in. 'Well, come on, then, fix me up.'

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, permitted places the handful of leaves into her mouth and begins to chew them. My mother would use other methods, Likewise, it's not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

'Oh-wa.' The sound comes out of my mouth before I can stop it. It's as if the leaves are actually leaching the pain right out of the sting.

Permitted gives a giggle. 'Lucky you had the sense to pull the stingers out or you'd be a lot worse.' 'Do my neck! Do my cheek!' I almost beg.

Permitted stuffs another handful of leaves in her mouth, and soon I'm laughing, for the reason that the relief is so sweet. I notice a long burn on the Permitted forearm. 'I've got

something for that.' I set aside my weapons and anoint her arm with the burn medicine.

'You have good guarantors,' she says longingly.

'You weren't joking, about wanting me for an ally?' she asks.

'Have you gotten anything yet?' I asked. She shakes her head-no.

'You will, though- watch. The closer we get to the end; the more people will realize how ingenious you are.' I turn the meat over. 'No, I meant it,' I say. I can almost hear Sam-groaning as I team up with this wispy child. Likewise, I want her. Because she's a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of my sister.

'Okay,' she says, and holds out her hand. We shake. 'It's a deal.' Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, Likewise, neither of us mentions that. She says sometimes a flock will wander into the orchard and they get a decent lunch that day. For a while, all conversation stops as we fill our stomachs. The gosling has a delicious meal that's so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it. permitted is a big handful of some sort of starchy root to the meal. Roasted

over the fire, they have the sharp sweet taste of a parsnip. She recognizes the bird, too, some wild thing they call a gosling in her district.

'Oh,' says permitted with a sigh. 'I've never had a whole leg to myself before.' I'll bet she hasn't. I'll bet meat hardly ever comes her way. 'Take the other,' I say.

'Categorically?'

'Take whatever you want. Now that I've got a bow and arrows, I can get more. Plus I've got snares. I can show you how to set them,' I say. permitted still looks uncertainly at the leg. 'Oh, take it,' I say, putting the drumstick in her hands. 'It will only keep a few days anyway, and we've got the whole bird plus the rabbit.' Once she's got hold of it, her appetite wins out and she takes a huge mouthful.

Her eyes widen. 'Oh, no, we're not allowed to eat the crops.' 'I'd have thought, in area 11, you'd have a bit more to eat than us. You know, since you grow the food,' I say. 'They arrest you or something?' I asked.

'They whip you and make everyone else watch,' says Leah. 'The mayor's very strict about it.'

As well, our mayor, Madge's father, doesn't seem to have much taste for such events. Maybe being the least prestigious, poorest, most laugh at community in the country has its advantages. Such as, being largely ignored by the Capitol as long as we produce our coal quotas.

I can tell by her expression that it's not that uncommon an occurrence. A public whipping's a rare thing in quarter 14, although occasionally one occurs. Technically, Permitted and I could be whipped on a daily basis for poaching in the woods- well, technically, we could get a whole lot worse- except all the officials buy our meat.

'Do you get all the coal you want?' she asks.

'No,' I answer. 'Just what we buy and whatever we track in on our boots.'

It is enigmatic, my sisterly and terrifying. Even from orbit, the scope of flora present on the surface designates a

moon brimming with life. They added more moons just to play with us yet I know the Earth one.

Other than the richness of varying colors, the trees resemble those of Earth. They have the familiar trunks, branches, and leaves, though due to the difference in gravity, many of the shapes appear strange to humans and the proportions are greater because of the lower gravity. The trees and plant life of Zansboro have formed links to the mental connections between their roots that link to us and the troopers and effectively act as neurons, creating a moon-wide 'brain' that has achieved, by the chip.

Larger than Earth it feels- this is like a tournament where you are the fighter lost in the world that made- it's not really a real place to others- yet we have heard about it- like a stadium- out in this world. With what I would call wraparound screen that never- were you can see things they say and want you to do- was it never- ever seem to end- where you're all lost within- where you feel this is all real- yet the bloodshed is for actual.

You're just one small pixel in a big sea of gaming and entertainment. Looks like a lush paradise standard during the day, Likewise, at night, virtually all life on the moon exhibits bioluminescent qualities in various shades of blue, purple and green, which most likely provides them better camouflage at night on Zarnsboro. I can see nothing, after running fast and far I run to a steep downward slope or even cliff. To my right lies a lake. To my left and back, sparse piney woods.

Run- run- run... for what I thought was forever.

I hear his instructions in my head. 'Just clear out, put as much distance as you can between yourselves and the others, and find a source of water also now I need to clean it.'

I heard in my mind Jump- I am not far from you... so I did into the water I want. Swimming over I stopped, and made a fire, I had to with it now night and dropping off down to 32° when just five or so minutes ago it was 99° Fahrenheit. I see him running for me- the lip was made- over the high falls- where there was a wolf chasing him- that did not make the jump.

Zoie- 'I once told you- if one gets out it's a victory'

Elody- She said that to me also when I said how do I when or get away. So-o in other words, we all could die, and no one would give a shit.

Nevertheless, it's tempting, so tempting, when I see the bounty waiting there before me. And I know that if I don't get it, someone else will. That the Career tries Likewise, who survive the bloodbath will divide up most of these life-sustaining spoils. Something catches my eye. There, resting on a mound of blanket rolls is a silver sheath of arrows and a bow, already strung, just waiting to be engaged. That's mine, I think. It's meant for me.

I'm fast... I can sprint faster than any of the girls in our school although a couple can beat me in distance races. Likewise, this forty-yard length, this is what I am built for. I know I can get it, I know I can reach it first, Likewise, then the question is how quickly can I get out of there? By the time I've scrambled up the packs and grabbed the weapons, others will have reached the horn, and one or two I might be able to pick

off, Likewise, say there's a dozen, at that close range, they could take me down with the spears and the clubs. Or their own powerful fists.

The hijacking I call it- Before the tournament, some tried to run get a train that was passing in the night- others- I remember and had playing in my mind the one that ran- that tried escaping on the rail line. What they did was tunnel their way out- making a hole in the boxcar, and dripping their body down on the ties, feet dragging on and the cars would all pass Likewise, the last was they had to roll over the tracks in-between the wheels. In the car Jarrah- said let's see that rope- the rope is something we all have it's so needed. Even if just one of these bracelets... cute the girls said when she was trying to strangle another girl out like she was a guard... on the top of the tram... Do you have a better plane then girl? Yes- let's see the rope- it when around her neck as he made two notes- there the notes there smash the joints in nick- dead in 15 seconds. They did it they killed all the troopers on top of the train- and made the drive or the train go an alternative way off to freedom or so they thought.

Over the tallest viaduct in the world 3,000 feet in the air- they got rid of all the bodies... the one boy rolling his eyes not were there uniform, like the rest of them that could. Planes were flown in to bomb or gunned down them the runners as they go for a small-town call Knox in Italy for freedom on the Kane line bypass. They fired back Likewise; it was 100 them over 3,000 of them.

~*~

Rip out of my thought- Get the weapon he said- that was the next part making it to where they have my stuff. And that was 5,280 feet always. From the starting line. Where we all have to meet up- yet that the tournament- no we have to get this with them about to kill with bare hands. The very weapon that might be my salvation, I have small hands- I no- yet with her past training in my mind I have the power. And with this rope I killed my first eight-year-old girl- that was looking at me for trust- I lied saying I would not do that to her- yet this is a tournament of life or death, not trust- she was going to kill me- remember that... did I want to NO- did I have to yes. She was so cute- I made sure that she remembered... giving her the

moment in my mind that played in all the minds around in the land that I made the kill- a sacrifice of life so we can live.

(Thank you for your blood- and breath- no it mine to have. Not- forgotten the crowd makes their hand moment- like a wave then placing it on their hart and kissing her goodbye. These are what are area dose anyways.) We won't piece here not fighting yet some parts are an uprising, and that where you get wiped off the planet.

And I only see one bow on her, and I get it- yet I can do that as I make my way to the point, of the Permitted first phase- of this long drawn out tournament- I know the minute must be almost up for me to get what I want from her and will have to decide what my strategy will be, right to make- to get there I am off my path now

I know after fight this girl off me... running and playing cat and mouse with her... and I find myself positioning my feet to run, not away into the stir rounding forests toward the falls, I hope that is right to get back to where I started.

Yet, I know I will run into all of them that may have their shit now- so what do- I do- run without? I also have now a

small thumb handgun, pink with a white grip- something I keep from her forever, I knew if I win that would be something I would treasure- I undressed her seeing what I could find- it what you do when you get a kill- down in her undies in the front was this gun, deep up in her vajayjay the hand was out some point downward, and I tore it out and now have it in my handbag- good hiding spot why didn't I think of that? And one round in the gun. I wonder if that is meant for my own head.

Is it a choice no? She did care if it when off inside her why would she? So, you pack thing where you have the holes... on the thing, girls have over the boys. Now I need a knife to see what shoved up their guts for that end- we- no. I know they have this looked into- yet if you have the money you can pack hidden things like that there... I don't have the money. A hidden gun in the puss- puss- they all say wow or something like that- they went nuts at how clever that was- the newsman said- not good enough if you can't fire it the man said on the screen, or the other girl would have been dead. How that girl is living is hard for me to get... to John Sha-Long to Steven Hung-dong. We like that girl didn't we said Steven a real cutie- what was her last name Hard-cock? No- Sharcock- yah that it- Yah-ha Sharcock-

she was a cute one with drack, yet some rosy-sh look to her hair in the sunlight- and green eyes- not blue- and so not brown like the others. With a thin look.

I know I have to kill a week girl to get more that is the next one, I am weak I know it killing this young girl, I never thought I would be able to do such a thing.

When suddenly I notice my boy on his way, he's about five-run boys look for what I am, the shit we need- to not die- to my right I see one wanting to jump me, and he did- my boy slit his hand off- quite a fair distance I see more, still I can tell he's looking at me or my man, and I think he might be shaking his head at what my man did for me- after killing the other girl they he may have liked before all this took place.

The one he wanted- if he wins... Likewise, the sun's in my eyes and I see nothing Likewise, - my man loving eyes in mine I feel safe if only for that moment and the moment was gone to fast, and while I'm perplexing over it the gong rings out. I was no at this point given his ring- something he said I need to prove to him, and what I said to him also- and that was killing a girl or boy- to show that would never betray one- another and

the other way around- we killed each other now- where have the promise- a band to show for it. it mine has to rock hearts in it with our names- and it is gold, he is just a gold band with our names. Yong, I went like a woman now- yet I haven't even had my first period, and there are making that happen tonight. Like all the other girls- to be as they call it far- in a tournament that not.

More blood funny no?

36

And I've missed it the rounds to my heart and hand! I've missed by not much!

For the reason that that extra couple of seconds, I've lost by seeing my dream of living in the days to come- by not being ready... for all this... I need to eat... so I grab him and we both shuffle our feet for a moment, confused at the direction my brain wants to take... of what's next, and then he swipes me off my forward in his arms, tucking the sheet of plastic and a loaf of bread that was tucked in my top I eat as he runs in the woods, and I feed him some to bits and pieces.

The pickings are so small and I'm so angry with my boy for distracting me that I sprint in twenty yards to retrieve a bright orange backpack that could hold anything because I can't stand living with virtually anything.

A boy, I think from Area 9, reaches the pack at the same time I do and for a brief time we grapple with it and then he coughs, splattering my face with blood.

I stagger back, repulsed by the warm, sticky spray. Then the boy slips to the ground. That's when I see the knife in his back. Already others- Likewise, have reached the Cornucopia and are spreading out to attack.

Yes, the girl from Area 2, ten yards away, running toward me, one hand clutching a half-dozen knives. I've seen her

throw in training. She never misses. And I'm her next target.

I was right they now have more than me... what to do... All the general fear I've been feeling condenses into an

immediate fear of this girl, this predator who might kill me in seconds.

Arena shoots through me and I sling the pack over one shoulder and run full speed for the woods. I can hear the blade whistling toward me and reflexively hike the pack up to protect my head.

The blade lodges in the pack. Both straps on my shoulders now, I make for the trees. Somehow, I know the girl will not pursue me. That she'll be drawn back into the Cornucopia before all the good stuff is gone. A grin crosses my face. Thanks for the knife, I think.

At the edge of the woods, I turn for one instant to survey the field. About a dozen or so try Likewise, are riding out away at one another at the horn. Several lie dead already on the ground.

Those who have taken flight are disappearing into the trees or into the void opposite me. I continue running until the woods have hidden me from the other try Likewise, then slow into a steady jog that I think I can maintain for a while. For the next few hours, I alternate between jogging and walking,

putting as much distance as I can between myself and my competitors. I lost my bread during the struggle with the boy from Community 7 Likewise, managed to stuff my plastic in my sleeve, and so as I walk, I fold it effortlessly and tuck it into a pocket.

I also free the knife- it's a fine one with a long sharp blade, saw-like near the handle, which will make it handy for sawing through things- and slide it into my belt.

I don't dare stop to observe the contents of the pack yet. I just keep moving, pausing only to check for pursuers.

I can go for a long time. I know that from my days in the woods.

Nevertheless, I will need water. Instruction in my mind given, and since I sort of botched the first, I keep a sharp eye out for any sign of it. No luck... I feel I have other than his love.

The woods begin to evolve, and the pines are intermixed with a diversity of trees, some I identified, some completely foreign to me. At one point, I hear a noise and pull

my knife, thinking I may have to defend myself, Likewise, I have only startled a rabbit- that I got my using an aero.

'Good to see you,' I whispered... If there's one rabbit, there could be hundreds just waiting to be snared.

The ground declines down some as you can see here. I don't particularly like this too much. Gorges make me feel trapped as I look up at the viaduct and nowhere, I am now at or so I think. I want to be high, like in the hills around Area 14, where I can see my rivals' forthcoming.

However, I have no choice Likewise, to keep going running like hillbilly-hell.

Funny though, I don't feel too bad.

The days of guzzling with coffin paid off. I've got staying power even though I'm short on sleep though I feel it. I feel him going in and out on me too in my mind. Being in the woods is refreshing. I'm glad for the loneliness, even though it's a misapprehension, for the reason that I'm most likely on-screen right now.

I feel it not looking cute Likewise, yet sweet to them looking at how to sleep the little one is... the joke made about tucking me and giving me a bedtime story.

Not unswervingly Likewise, off and on. There are so many decreases to show the first day, down to 60- that honor for the stars still standing- hiking through the woods isn't much to look at in the day Likewise, at night it's whoo- wah.

Even so, they'll show me enough to let individuals know I'm alive, intact and on the travel. One of the substantial days of betting is the opening when the initial wounded come in. Conversely, that can't compare to what happens as the field shrinks to a handful of players.

It's late night and the ground is a wondrous sight when I begin to hear the cannons. Each shot represents a dead try Likewise. The fighting must have finally stopped at the Cornucopia. They never- ever assemble the massacre bodies until the killers have isolated.

On an opening day, they don't even fire the cannons until the initial fighting's over for the motive that it's too hard to keep track of the death toll.

I allow myself to pause, panting, wheezing, and puffing as I count the shots.

One, two, and three... on and on until they reach eleven. Eleven dead in all 59 stands. All the names I could care less about there just kill me... My fingernails scrape at the dried blood the boy from Area 5 coughed into my face I got him some on the hand too. He's gone, certainly. I wonder about him and where he is off too, I can hear him yet not see.

Has he lasted through the day at least I knew that? I well no in a few hours what next- if there are any more surprises, they made up fast for us to endure like they did with having wild wolf after us... and big cats. I knew I had to find a place to sleep that would be safe in an open field with a ring a fire around me- that would keep everything away no? If I am the one inside feeding the flames- I knew not for long yet I need some shut-eye. Some are in caves- yet I don't want their batshit virus. No thanks... When they hologram the dead's images into the sky for the rest of us to see, and on our bracelets...

He had no confidence he could win.

And I will not end up with the unpleasant the task of killing him. Maybe it's better if he's out of this for good, I don't know all I know is this is killing me too.

I got to the point where I go my gear... all the things that were my dad's or passed in the family down for this moment. There were in a lockbox that I had to crack also... just part of the tournament to them, as you have some kid breathing down your neck, wanting to kill you- I was playing with the combo.

One eye on the lock and one off to all the other sides, I was frantic... yet the combo was my great granddad's ID number- something that was deep in my mind that I knew I had. I tried all the family members, and that one worked, there was on can of dog food too- yet I know I will eat anything... that what they gave me... to live on. Comparable to a mutt...?

I slump down next to my backpack, dog- tired- with the meet of three of them...

I will eat anything... I need to go through it anyway before night falls. See what I have to work with. As I unhook the straps, I can feel it's sturdily made although a rather

unfortunate color. This orange will practically glow in the dark. I make a mental note to camouflage it first thing tomorrow.

I flip open the flap. What I want most, right at this moment, is water. A girl that wanted to play nice directive to immediately find water was not arbitrary- I was going to do the same play nice until the turn on one another.

I won't last long without it, and she knows the way or so I will trust. It may be a trap- yet I go for it- the thought in my mind said she okay- I will be there too.

It's a trap- I see 10 run up on me and I load the gun- popping them all off in the head, her first, stopping to reload the gun with black powder, the last one I say her eye color she was that close. Yet I got them all... the knives, that were thrown at me not all missing me, the arrows fly past, yet I dodge them as I am behind a tree.

49- I see all them that have passed by my hands- I was happy- and rewarded for my bravery. They added a metal to my uniform sent in by the unmanned drone of a bluebird square under it are pin like thing hanging out of all that I killed off with their colors. I have 14 deaths now- that I have claimed,

all the names I don't even know- nor did they know me or do anything to me for them to pass on.

The number went down more- as the update when up down to 20 kids. 15 boys and 5 girls... with me included.

Now the real tournament start to me- as the blood drips from my teeth I giggled crazily... wanting to win this no matter what! Ha- ha I can do this- as I rip the raw meat with my k-9-teeth that I shared with a fingernail fill, that I found in one of the girl's handbags, I have all these things now that I want the rest, I let behind with their naked bodies- for something to find and eat.

I killed boys- I never thought they all would be so different... and something I would not understand. Yet I had to do it! I used them... and I got them to fall for me in every way I could. It's all part of the star tournament for a girl!

37

For a few days, I'll be able to function with unpleasant symptoms of dehydration and the runs, Likewise, after that I'll deteriorate into helplessness and be dead in a

week, tops. I carefully lay out the provisions and flamed what I could. I am down to 60 pounds. It's been three weeks now... my mind is spinning with what if. He is week somewhere... lost he would not say... all I heard was go one and do this.

Nothing to sleep on Likewise, the ground and piled up pin tree limbs.

The bottle- the water of another girl, that I am not sure about, I added bleach I found of another dead boy body 16 drops, and I can have it? I was out at this point- run and always moving in the night- and the day resting some... if there asleep like the animals that are when I move. And pop them in the head will they dream of banging me off. I got one last night that way and it feels so-ooo good!

I got his tighties underwire and made a white flag out of them hanging now on a stick, for them all to see on the screen of his giving up, that was an easy kill to make... and I wanted to be a dick about it... for he did not have much of one. I would no... my boy is the man here! I hope he is all good.

I developed aware of the dryness in my throat and mouth, the cracks in my lips. I've been moving all day long. It's

been hot and I've sweat a- lot and I know that is not good. Yet that is not stopping the boys to making their way at me... I can fight all them all- I thought, or can I?

38

As I refill my pack, I have an awful thought. The lake, I have made it there- over high wood rope passageways and train, replying down the sides of rock faces, I did it all, The Kamahi Lake is a full day's journey from where I sit now, a much harder journey with nothing to drink for you can really drink this with all that is in it. And then, even if I reach it, it's sure to be heavily guarded by some of the Career stars.

I'm about to panic when I remember the rabbit I got earlier today. It has to drink, too or I have to eat it without-cocking. I just have to find out where- he is... that is all I can think about at this point is him.

4 weeks now- Dusk is closing in and I am ill at ease. The trees are too thin to offer much camouflage. The layer of pine needles that muffles my footsteps also makes tracking animals harder when I need their trails to find water. And I'm still heading downhill, deeper and deeper into a valley that

seems endless, my dress looks like Swiss cheese at this point all dirty and

such, no underwear at this point it was used as
cordage. Like my shoe strings...

I'm hungry, too, Likewise, I don't dare break into my precious store of crackers and beef yet. Instead, I take my knife and go to work on a pine tree, cutting away the outer bark and scraping off a large handful of the softer inner bark. I slowly chew the stuff as I walk along. After a week of the finest food in the world, it's a little hard to choke down. Then I've eaten plenty of pine in my life. I'll adjust quickly and don't think about it.

In another hour, it's clear I've got to find a place to camp yet again. Night creatures are coming out and up inside my girlie-ness gross. I can hear the infrequent hoot or howl, my first clue that I'll be competing with natural predators for the rabbits. As to whether I'll be viewed as a source of food, it's too soon to tell. There could be any number of animals pestering me at this instant.

Nonetheless, right now, I decided to make my fellow stars a priority. I'm sure many will continue hunting through the night.

Those who fought it out at the lavishness will have food, an abundance of water from the lake, torches or flashlights, and weapons they're itching to use. I can only hope I've traveled far and fast enough to be out of choice.

Before settling down, I take my wire and set two twitch-up snares in the brush. I know it's risky to be setting traps, Likewise, food will go so fast out here. And I can't set snares on the run. Still, I walk another five minutes before making camp.

I pick my tree carefully, a willow, not terribly tall Likewise, set in a clump of other willows, and camouflage in those long, flowing tresses. I hiked up, sticking to the stronger branches close to the trunk, and find a sturdy fork for my bed. It takes some doing, then again, I arrange the sleeping bag in a relatively comfortable manner. I found the bag of one of the girls I killed number 2 on my line up.

I'm small enough to tuck the top of the bag over my head, Likewise, I put on my hood as well. As night falls, the air is cooling quickly. In the face of the risk I took in getting the backpack, I know now it was the right choice. It's all about choosing what do you pick? What would you do as me?

I place my backpack in the foot of the bag, then slide in after it. As a precaution, I remove my belt, loop it all the way around the division and my sleeping bag, and refasten it at my waist. Now if I roll over in my sleep, I won't go crashing to the earth.

Nightfall has just come when I hear the anthem that precedes the death summary. Through the branches, I can see the seal of the Capitol, which appears to be floating in the atmosphere.

I'm really viewing another screen, an enormous one that's transported by of one of their disappearing hovercraft.

This sleeping bag, radiating back and preserving my body heat, will be energetic.

I'm sure there are several other stars whose major anxiety right now is how to stay warm whereas I may essentially be able to get a few hours of sleep.

If only I wasn't so desire of all that is life.

The anthem fades out and the sky goes dark for a moment. At home, we would be watching full coverage of each and every

killing, Likewise, that is thought to give a one- sided gain to the living others.

Likewise, now instead of scores, they post only community numbers. I take a deep breath as the face of the all dead kids begin and tick them off one by one on my fingers.

For the occasion, if I got my hands on the bow and shot someone, my secret would be revealed to all. No, here in the arena, all we see are the same snapshot they showed when they televised our training scores. Simple headshots. Yet this time with a star saying they have fallen.

The first to see is the girl from Borough 2. That means that the career stars from 1 and 2 have all endured. No astonishment there. Then the boy from 3, I didn't presume that one, usually all the vocations make it through the first day. The boy from Community 3. I guess the scary-faced girl made it. Both try Likewise, between 4 and 7. The boy from 8. Both from 10. Yes, there's the boy who I fought for the backpack. I've run through my fingers, only one deader try Likewise, to go. Is it him? No, there's the girl from the borough 12. That's it, the Capitol closure is back with a final musical exaggeration. Then obscurity and the sounds of the timberland pick up where it left off.

I'm thankful my man is still flourishing and not dead or messed up in the head. I tell myself again that if I get killed, his winning will be a big advantage to his mother the most, for he is a- lot like me. This is what I tell myself to clarify the self-contradictory sentiments, which ascend when I think of him all the time. When I not with him I touch myself like I want him to touch me.

I think of you...

The gratitude that he gave me an edge by professing his love for me in the interview. The dread that we may come face-to-face at any moment in this arena. I know what I may have to do... Yet I will not and never will him even if we hear them say someone KILL- KILL- KILL.

5 not dead, Likewise, none from Area 14. I try to work out who is left. A bonnie boy he made it through the first day after all. I can't help feeling glad. That makes ten of us. The other three I'll figure out tomorrow. Now when it is dark, and I have traveled far, and I am nestled high in this tree, now I must try and rest I know this is good enough for now.

I haven't really slept in four days, and then there's been the long day's voyage into the arena. Gradually, I allow my muscles to reduce. My eyes to close... The last thing I think is it's fortunate I don't snore or at least he never said that I did. I was on top of him in the tree, all snuggled.

Spur-of-the-moment! The sound of a breaking branch wakes me yet not him. I shake him up- how long have I been asleep? Four hours? Five- nine hours- too long?

Yet we had lots of covers up there 500 feet in the air.

The tip of my nose is icy cold- yet I kiss him and kip rubs my nose- and the heat of our body are keeping the child down. Break! Snap! This is not the sound of a branch under our feet, Likewise, the sharp crack of one coming from a tree. Crack! Snap! I judge it to be several hundred yards to my right. Leisurely, without a sound, I turn myself in that route. For a few minutes, there's nothing Likewise, darkness and some come to blows. Then I see a flash and a small fire begins to bloom. A pair of hands warms over flames, Likewise, I can't make out more than that yet- moving fast like.

I have to bite my lip not to scream every foul name, and I know at the fire maze. What are they thinking he asked me to hold me in his arms as we go off and he leans in for the kiss and I met that the rest of the way?

A fire just at nightfall would have been one thing. Those who battled at the profusion, with their superior strength and surplus of supplies, they couldn't possibly have been near enough to spot the flames then. Likewise, then now, when they

have almost certainly been searching the forests for hours looking for wounded or dead- the wounded are left to pass on there no help for the week. You might as well be waving a flag and shouting, 'Come and get me!' And here I am a stone's throw from the biggest idiot in the Tournament. Strapped in a tree. Not daring to flee since my general location has just been broadcast to any killer who cares. I mean, I know it's cold out here and not everybody has a sleeping bag. Likewise, then again then you grit your teeth and stick it out until dawn!

I lay smoldering in my bag with his naked body on top of mine, I feel his skin so smooth- for the next couple of hours really thinking that if I can get off- enough even if death is nearing us both- or just one, my nature has been to flee, not fight with him caring me out of harm. A boy that is fighting for me is what I have always dreamed about more than marriage even. I have dreamed about that too what young girl has not- it the most important day in a girl's life- no? I could see me with him- at the end of this now.

However, obviously, this person's a hazard. Ill-advised people are dangerous. Then this one undoubtedly

doesn't have much in the way of guns while I've got this excellent knife.

The atmosphere is still dim yet sparkly with the stars overhead all twilight, Likewise, I can feel the first signs of dawn approaching. I'm an establishment to think us- meaning the individual whose death I'm now developing and me- we might really have gone unnoticed. Then I hear it. numerous pairs of feet breaking into a run. The fire starter must have dozed off. They're on her formerly she can escape from. I know it's a girl now, I can tell by the pleading, the agonized scream that follows. Then there's laughter and compliments from several voices. Someone cries out, '13- or 12 down and 11 to go no!' yet there so far away from us now it may be weeks where it we'll just be he and I- I wonder if I will get knocked up?

I might- with all this that we are doing, I know nothing about that yet I sure I could do that, they would still not take me out of the fight and they would still kill him off to... so he has to pull out- and have it go on my cheeks. Would you squeeze and suck my breast right here (she pointed to where she wanted him to kiss and draw in with lips.) I asked in a moment of looking up at the skies.

The sighs- she cried- saying I don't want to ever leave you- wrapped around his was- still locked into him- and his love and Mr. Winky- that what I call that thingie. He was kissing my neck- and I was him- I think- I got a hick-ie somewhere on my collarbone it's black and blue.

And a chapped hood- from kissing it- It's love- and they're not stopping it-

NEVER- EVER! The videos we have would kick your tongue out tongue. And yes- you can see me doing that too- hold it out and showing that before the goop-ie was gulped hard.

After all the sex- he-a being- the sweet boy- that he is Likewise, a tampon in me. The sting hanging there he looked at me- saying- if I when this I want you- if you when this would you say the same- YES! We cleaned off in the river in the moonlight- a naked swim- where the eyes were looking you didn't get to us. We run more than the others... about 10 miles. I don't feel all the cute looking like I do muddy and showing hair everywhere yet- love is love and you just don't care if it is.

'Why not...? You saved me with those bugs.

You're smart enough to still be alive. And I can't seem to shake you anyway,' I say. She blinks at me, trying to decide. 'You hungry?' I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the meat. 'Come on then, I've had two kills today.' Permitted tentatively steps out into the open. 'I can fix your stings.' 'Can you?' I ask. 'How?' She digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves. I'm almost certain they're the ones my mother uses. 'Where'd you find those?'

'Just around. We all carry them when we work in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,' says Leah. 'There is a lot here, too.'

'That's right. Are you part of 11? Cultivation,' I say. 'Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you've got wings.' Permitted smiles. I've landed on one of the few things she'll admit pride in. 'Well, come on, then. Fix me up.'

I notice a long burn on Leah's forearm. 'I've got something for that.' I set aside from my weapons and anoint her arm with the burn medicine; her stuff another handful of leaves

in her mouth, and soon I'm laughing for the reason that the release is so sweet.

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, Permitted places the handful of leaves into her mouth and begins to chew them. My mother would use other methods,

Likewise, it's not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

'Oh.' The sound comes out of my mouth before, I can stop it. It's as if the leaves are actually, leaching the pain right out of the sting. Permitted gives a giggle. 'Lucky you had the sense to pull the stingers out or you'd be a lot worse.' 'Do my neck...! Do my cheek...!' I almost begging... 'You have good sponsors,' she says longingly. 'Have you gotten anything yet?' I ask. She shakes her head. 'You will, though. Watch. The closer we get to the end; the more people will realize how clever you are.' I turn the meat over.

'You weren't joking, about wanting me for an ally?' she asks. 'No, I meant it,' I say. I can almost hear Sam- groaning as I team up with this wispy child.

Likewise, I want her. Roasted over the fire, they have the sharp sweet taste of a parsnip. She recognizes the bird, too, some wild thing they call a gosling in her district. She says sometimes a flock will wander into the orchard and they get a decent lunch that day. For a while, all conversation stops as we fill our stomachs. The gosling has a delicious meal that's so fatty, the grease drips down your face when you bite into it.

For the reason that she's a survivor, and I trust her, and why not admit it? She reminds me of my sister. 'Okay,' she says, and holds out her hand. We shake. 'It's a deal.' Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, Likewise, neither of us mentions that.

She a big handful of some sort of starchy root to the meal. Yet she so nice to me I just can't- I can put a knife in the little sweetheart. 'Oh,' says she sighs heavy. 'I've never had a whole leg to myself before.'

I'll bet she hasn't. I'll bet meat hardly ever comes her way. 'Take the other,' I say.

'Really?' She asks.

'Take whatever you want. Now that I've got a bow and arrows, I can get more. Plus, I've got snares. I can show you how to set them,' I say. Permitted still looks uncertainly at the leg. 'Oh, take it,' I say, putting the drumstick in her hands. 'It will only keep a few days anyway, and we've got the whole bird plus the rabbit.' Once she's got hold of it, her appetite wins out and she takes a huge mouthful. 'I'd have thought, in Community Eleven, you'd have a bit more to eat than us.

You know, since you grow the food,' I say.

Permitted eyes widen big that one thing about her eyes is really big. 'Oh, no, we're not allowed to eat the crops.'

'They arrest you or something?' I ask.

'They whip you and make everyone else watch-'

'The mayor's very strict about it.'

'Don't you have to be in school?' I ask.

'Not during harvest. Everyone works then,' says she.

It's interesting, hearing about her life.

We have so little communication with anyone outside our district. In fact, I wonder if the Tournament makers are blocking out our conversation because even though the information seems harmless, they don't want people in different districts to know about one another. The suggestion is made by her- cute- but- really, we lay out all our food to plan ahead. She's seen most of mine, Likewise, I add the last couple of crackers and beef strips to the pile. She's gathered quite a collection of roots, nuts, greens, and even some berries. I tentatively bite into one, and it's as good as our blackberries. Taking

Permitted on as an ally seems a better choice all the time. We divide up our food supplies, so in case we're separated, we'll both be set for a few days. Apart from the food, permitted has a small waterskin, a homemade slingshot, and an extra pair of socks. She also has a sharp shard of rock she uses as a knife.

I roll an unfamiliar berry in my fingers. 'You sure this is safe?' 'Oh, yes, we have them back home. I've been eating them for days,' she says, popping a handful in her mouth. 'I know it's not much,' she says as if embarrassed, ' Likewise, I had to get away from the Cornucopia fast.'

'You did just right,' I say. When I spread out my gear, she gasps a little when she sees the sunglasses.

'How did you get those?' She asks.

'In my pack. They've been useless so far. They don't block the sun and they make it harder to see,' I say with a shrug.

'These aren't for sun, they're for obscurity,' cries Leah. 'Sometimes, when we harvest through the night, they'll pass out a few pairs to those of us highest in the trees. Where the torchlight doesn't reach. One time, this boy Martin, he tried to keep his pair. Hid it in his pants. They killed him on the spot.'

'They killed a 4 boy for taking these?' I say.

'Yes, and everyone knew he was no danger.

Martin wasn't right in the head. I mean, he still acted like a three-year-old. He just wanted the glasses to play with,' she said.

Hearing this makes me feel like Community 14 is some sort of safe haven. Of course, people keel over from starvation all the time, Likewise, I can't imagine the Peacekeepers murdering a simple-minded child. There's a little girl, one of the grandkids of my Grannie, who wanders around the mess-hall. She's not quite right, Likewise, she's treated as a sort of pet. People toss her scraps and things.

So, they're fighting in a pack. I'm not really flabbergasted. Often alliances are formed in the early stages of the Playoffs. The strong band together to hunt down the weak then, when the tension becomes too great, begin to turn on one another. I don't have to wonder too hard who has made this alliance. It'll be the remaining

Career stars from constituencies 1, 2, and 6. Two boys and three girls. The ones who lunched together.

For a moment, I hear them read through the girl for supplies. I can tell by their comments they've found

nonentity good. I phenomenon if the victim is Permitted
Likewise, quickly dismissing the thought.

She's much too bright to be building a fire like that.

'Better clear out so they can get the body before it starts stinking.' I'm almost certain that's the brutish boy from quarter 2. There are buzzes of assent and then, to my horror, I hear the pack heading toward me.

They do not know I'm here. How could they? And I'm well concealed in the clump of trees. At least while the sun stays down. Then my black sleeping bag will turn from camouflage to trouble. If they just keep moving, they will pass me and be gone in a minute.

Likewise, the Careers stop in the clearing about ten yards from my tree. They have penlights, torches. I can see an arm here, a boot there, through the breaks in the undergrowth. I turn to stone, not even daring to breathe. Have they spotted me? No, not yet. I can tell from their words their minds are elsewhere. We even had a moment where we got to slow dance under the stars and the green leaves sawing like the wind.

'Shouldn't we have heard an in my mind by now the callouts- or are we off for some love'n- for that is what they want to see- young love?' 'I'd say yes... Nothing to prevent them from going in immediately- to this- she didn't know- I want the time.' It did not take much for them to say yes...

'You can feed yourself. Can they?' I ask.

'They don't need to. They have all those supplies,' Permitted says.

'Say they didn't. Say the supplies were gone. How long would they last?' I say. 'I mean, it's the Famine

Tournament, right?'

' Likewise, Elody, they're not hungry,' says Leah.

'No, they're not. That's the problem,' I agree. And for the first time, I have a plan. A plan that isn't motivated by the need for flight and evasion. An offensive plan. 'I think we're going to have to fix that, Leah.'

Permitted has decided to trust me wholeheartedly. I know this because as soon as the anthem finishes, she

snuggles up against me and falls asleep. Nor do I have any misgivings about her, as I take no particular precautions.

If she'd wanted me dead, all she would have had to do was disappear from that tree without pointing out the tracker jacker nest. Needling me, at the very back of my mind, is obvious. Both of us can't win these Tournament. Likewise, since the odds are still against either of us surviving, I manage to ignore the thought.

Besides, I'm distracted by my latest idea about the Careers and their supplies. Somehow Permitted and I must find a way to destroy their food. I'm pretty sure feeding themselves will be a tremendous struggle. Traditionally, the Career' strategy is to get hold of all the food early on and work from there. The years when they have not protected it well- one year a pack of hideous reptiles destroyed it, another a Tournament makers' flood washed it away- those are usually the years that from other districts have won.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is actually to their disadvantage, because they don't know how to be hungry.

Not the way Permitted and I do.

Likewise, I'm too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, have given me a sense of security. I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I've been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn. Tomorrow, it's the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon jolts me awake. The sky's streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, Likewise, there aren't any.

'Who do you think that was?' I can't help thinking of my boy. 'I don't know.' 'It could have been any of the others,' says Leah. 'I guess we'll know tonight.'

'Who's left again?' I ask.

'The boy from Community One. Both from Two. The boy from Three. Thresh and me. And you and My boy,' says Leah. 'That's eight. Wait, and the boy from Ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.'

There's someone else, Likewise, neither of us can remember who it is.

'I wonder how that last one died,' says Leah.

'No telling. Likewise, it's good for us. A death should hold the crowd for a bit. Maybe we'll have time to do something before the Tournament makers decide things have been moving too slowly,' I say. 'What's in your hands?'

'What kind are those?' I ask.

'Not sure. There's a marshy area over that way. Some kind of water bird,' she says.

It'd be nice to cook them, Likewise, neither of us wants to risk a fire. My guess is the one died today was a victim of the Careers, which means they've recovered enough to be back in the Tournament. We each suck out the insides of an egg,

eat a rabbit leg and some berries. It's a good breakfast anywhere.

'Ready to do it?' I say, pulling on my pack.

'Do what?' Says Leah, Likewise, by the way, she bounces up, and you can tell she's up for whatever I propose.

'Today we take out the Careers' food,' I say.

'Really? How?' You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she's exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal.

'No idea. Come on, we'll figure out a plan while we hunt,' I say.

We don't get much hunting done though because I'm too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of permitted about the Careers' base. She's only been in to spy on them briefly, Likewise, she's observant.

They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they've

been leaving another, the boy from Community 3, to watch over the supplies.

'The boy from Community Three?' I ask. 'He's working with them?'

'What weapons does he have?' I ask.

'Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, Likewise, Thresh could kill him easily,' says Leah.

'And the food's just out in the open?' I say. She nods. 'Something's not quite right about that whole setup.'

'I know. Likewise, I couldn't tell what exactly,' says Leah. 'Elody, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?'

'Burn it. Dump it in the lake. Soak it in fuel.' I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would My sister.

'Eat it!' She giggles.

'Don't worry, I'll think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.'

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I come to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forages in the meadows in a community where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things,

'Music.' This all I have...

'Music?' I say. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. 'You have a lot of time for that?'

'We sing at home. At work, too. That's why I love your pin,' she says, pointing to the blue jay that I've again forgotten about.

'You have blue jays?' I ask.

'Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,' she says.

'What do you mean?' I say.

'I'm usually up highest, so I'm the first to see the flag that signals quitting time.

There's a special little song I do,' says Leah. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. 'And the blue jays spread it around the orchard. That's how everyone knows to knock off,' she continues. 'They can be dangerous though if you get too near their nests. Likewise, you can't blame them for that.'

I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. 'Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.'

'Oh, no,' says Leah, closing my fingers back over the pin. 'I like to see it on you. That's how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.' She pulls a necklace woven out of some kind of grass from her shirt.

On it, hangs a roughly carved wooden star. Or maybe it's a flower. 'It's a good luck charm.'

'Well, it's worked so far,' I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. 'Maybe you should just stick with that.'

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she'll have time for on her own. We decide to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Leah's well stocked with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag, in case it's not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

'What about you? Won't you be cold?' she asks.
'Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake,' I say. 'You know, stealing isn't illegal here,' I say with a grin.

At the last minute, permitted decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. 'It might not work. Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you'll know I'm okay, only I can't get back right away.'

'Are there many blue jays here?' I ask.

'Haven't you seen them? They've got nests everywhere,' she says. I have to admit I haven't noticed. 'Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I'll see you for dinner,' I say.

Surprisingly, permitted throws her arms around me.

I only hesitate a moment before I hug her back. 'You, too,' I say. I turn and head back to the stream, feeling somehow worried. About Permitted being killed, about Permitted not being killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Permitted alone, about leaving my sister alone back home. No, my sister has my mother and Permitted and a baker who has promised she won't go hungry. Permitted has only me.

Once I reach the stream, I have only to follow it effortless to the place I initially picked it up after the bug attack. I have to be cautious as I move along the water though because I find my thoughts preoccupied with unanswered questions, most of which concern my boy. The cannon that fired early this morning, did that signify his death? If so, how did he die? At the hand of a Career? And was that in revenge for letting me live?

More likely it'd just burn itself out and then what? I'd have achieved nothing and given them far too much information about myself.

That I was here, that I have an accomplice, that I can use the bow and arrow with correctness.

I struggle again to remember that moment over Glimmer's body when he burst through the trees. Likewise, just the fact that he was sparkling leads me to doubt everything that happened. Somehow, I don't think he's talking about Leah. She didn't drop a nest of bug on him.

I stay put for a half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance. I could send a flaming arrow into the pyramid easily enough, I'm a good enough shot to get it

through those openings in the net Likewise, there's no guarantee it would catch.

There's no alternative. I'm going to have to get in close and see if I can't discover what exactly protects the supplies. In fact, I'm just about to reveal myself when a movement catches my eye. Several hundred yards to my right, I see someone emerge from the woods. For a second, I think it's

Leah, Likewise, then I recognize- she's the one we couldn't remember this morning creeping out onto the plain.

When she decides it's safe, she runs for the pyramid, with quick, small steps. Just before she reaches the circle of supplies that have been littered around the pyramid, she stops, searches the ground, and carefully places her feet on a spot.

Then she begins to approach the pyramid with strange little hops, sometimes landing on one foot, teetering slightly, sometimes risking a few steps. At one point, she launches up in the air, over a small barrel and lands poised on her tiptoes. Likewise, she overshoots slightly, and her momentum throws her forward. I hear her give a sharp squeal as her hands hit the ground, Likewise, nothing happens. In a moment, she's regained her feet and continues until she has reached the bulk of the supplies.

So, I'm right about the booby trap, Likewise, it's clearly more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too. How wily is she to have discovered this path into the food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack,

taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin.

Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to tip off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she's doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe and sound.

I must have been moving very slowly yesterday because I reach the shallow stretch where I took my bath in just a few hours. I stop to replenish my water and add a layer of mud to my backpack. It seems bent on reverting to orange no matter how many times I cover it.

My proximity to the Careers' camp sharpens my senses, and the closer I get to them, the more guarded I am, pausing frequently to listen for unnatural sounds, an arrow already fitted into the string of my bow. I don't see any others, Likewise, I do notice some of the things Permitted has mentioned. Patches of the sweet berries. A bush with the leaves that healed my stings. Clusters of bugs nests in the vicinity of the tree I was trapped in. And here and there, the black-and-

white flash of a blue jay wing in the branches high over my head.

I get a firmer grasp on my bow and go on. I make it to the copse Permitted has told me about and again have to admire her cleverness. It's right at the edge of the wood, Likewise, the bushy foliage is so thick down low I can easily observe the Career camp without being spotted. Between us lies the flat expanse where the Tournament began.

When I reach the tree with the abandoned nest at the foot, I pause a moment, to gather my courage. Permitted has given specific instructions on how to reach the best spying place near the lake from this point. Remember, I tell myself. You're the hunter now, not them.

The boy from Community 1, Permitted and the girl from Community 2, and a scrawny, ashen-skinned boy who must be from

Community 3. He made almost no impression on me at all during our time in the Capitol. I can remember almost nothing about him, not his costume, not his training score, not his interview. Even now, as he sits there fiddling with some kind

of plastic box, he's easily ignored in the presence of his large and domineering companions. Likewise, he must be of some value or they wouldn't have bothered to let him live. Still, seeing him only adds to my sense of unease over why the Careers would possibly leave him as a guard, why they have allowed him to live at all.

Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies. They must not have had the sense to remove the stingers, or if they did, not known about the leaves that healed them. Apparently, whatever medicines they found in the Cornucopia have been ineffective.

The whole setup is completely perplexing. The distance, the netting, and the presence of the boy from Community 3. One thing's for sure, destroying those supplies is not going to be as simple as it looks. Some other factor is at play here, and I'd better stay put until I figure out what it is. My guess is the pyramid is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

Really, the possibilities are endless.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He's pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that Permitted must have set the first campfire. We'd made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It's loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether or not the boy from Community 3 should stay or accompany them.

'He's coming. We need him in the woods, and his job's done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies,' says Leah.

'What about Lover Boy?' says the boy from Community 1.

'I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It's a miracle he hasn't bled to death yet. At any rate, he's in no shape to raid us,' says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

'Come on,' says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Community 3, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing I hear as they enter the woods is Permitted saying, 'When we find her, I kill her in my own way, and no one interferes.'

I realize I'm grinding my teeth in frustration. She has confirmed what I'd already guessed. Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such dexterity? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so as her hands made contact with the earth? You'd have thought. And slowly it begins to dawn on me. You'd have thought the very ground was going to explode.

'It's mined,' I whisper. That explains everything. The Careers' willingness to leave their supplies, her reaction, the involvement of the boy from Community 3, where they have the factories, where they make televisions and automobiles and explosives. Likewise, where did he get them? In the supplies?

That's not the sort of weapon the Tournament makers usually provide, given that they like to see the drawn blood personally. I slip out of the bushes and cross to one of the round metal plates that lifted them into the arena. The ground around it has been dug up and patted back down. The landmines were disabled after the sixty seconds we stood on the plates, Likewise, the boy from Community 4 must have managed to reactivate them. I've never seen anyone in the Tournament do that. I bet it came as a shock even to the Tournament Makers.

Well, hurray for the boy from Community 3 for putting one over on them, Likewise, what am I supposed to do now? Obviously, I can't go strolling into that mess without blowing myself sky-high. As for sending in a burning arrow, that's more laughable than ever. The mines are set off by pressure. It doesn't have to be a lot, either. One year, a girl dropped her token, a small wooden ball, while she was at her plate, and they literally had to scrape bits of her off the ground.

My arm's pretty good, I might be able to chuck some rocks in there and set off what? Maybe one mine? That could start a chain reaction. Or could it? Would the boy from Community 3 have placed the mines in such a way that a single

mine would not disturb the others? Thereby protecting the supplies Likewise, ensuring the death of the invader. Even if I only blew up one mine, I'd draw the Careers back down on me for sure. And anyway, what am I thinking? There's that net, clearly strung to deflect any such attack. Besides, what I'd really need is to throw about thirty rocks in there at once, setting off a big chain reaction, demolishing the whole lot.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from

Leah's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have probably begun to suspect some sort of trick.

Time is running out.

There is a solution to this, I know there is if I can only focus hard enough. I stare at the pyramid, the bins, the crates, too heavy to topple over with an arrow. Maybe one contains cooking oil, and the burning arrow idea is reviving when I realize I could end up losing all twelve of my arrows and not get a direct hit on an oil bin since I'd just be guessing. I'm genuinely thinking of trying to re-create Fox-face's trip up to the pyramid in hopes of finding a new means of destruction when

my eyes light on the burlap bag of apples. I could sever the rope in one shot, didn't I do as much in the Training Center? It's a big bag, Likewise, it still might only be good for one explosion. If only I could free the apples themselves.

I know what to do. I move into range and give myself three arrows to get the job done. I place my feet carefully, block out the rest of the world as I take meticulous aim, the first arrow tears through the side of the bag near the top, leaving a split in the burlap. The second widens it to a gaping hole. I can see the first apple teetering when I let the third arrow go, catching the torn flap of burlap and ripping it from the bag.

For a moment, everything seems frozen in time. Then the apples spill to the ground and I'm blown backward into the air.

The impact of the hard-packed earth of the plain knocks the wind out of me.

My backpack does little to soften the blow.

Fortunately, my quiver has caught in the crook of my elbow, sparing both itself and my shoulder, and my bow is locked in my grasp. The ground still shakes with explosions. I can't hear them. I can't hear anything at the moment. Likewise, the apples must have set off enough mines, causing debris to activate the others. I manage to shield my face with my arms as shattered bits of matter, some of it burning, rain down on me. An acrid smoke fills the air, which is not the best remedy for someone trying to regain the ability to breathe.

After about a minute, the ground stops vibrating. I roll on my side and allow myself a moment of satisfaction the sight of the smoldering wreckage that was recently the pyramid. The Careers aren't likely to salvage anything out of that.

I'd better get out of here, I think.

They'll be making a beeline for the place. Likewise, once I'm on my feet, I realize escape may not be so simple. I'm dizzy. Not the slightly wobbly kind, Likewise, the kind that sends the trees swooping around you and causes the earth to move in waves under your feet.

I take a few steps and somehow wind up on my hands and knees. I wait a few minutes to let it pass, Likewise, it doesn't.

Panic begins to set in. I can't stay here. Flight is essential. Likewise, I can neither walk nor hear. I place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody. Have I gone deaf from the explosion? The idea frightens me. I rely as much on my ears as my eyes as a hunter, maybe more at times.

Likewise, I can't let my fear show. Absolutely, positively, I am live on every screen in Pane.

So-o individuals really do tear out their hair and beat the ground with their fists- if I didn't know that it was aimed at me, at what I have done to him. Add to that my nearness, my inability to run or defend myself, and in fact, the whole thing has me terrified. I'm glad my hiding place makes it impossible for the cameras to get a close shot of me because I'm biting my nails like there's no tomorrow. Gnawing off the last bits of nail polish, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

No blood trails, I tell myself, and manage to pull my hood up over my head, tie the cord under my chin with uncooperative fingers. That should help soak up the blood. I can't walk, Likewise, can I crawl? I move forward tentatively. Yes, if I go very slowly, I can crawl. Most of the woods will offer insufficient cover. My only hope is to make it back to Leah's corpse and conceal myself in greenery. I can't get caught out here on my hands and knees in the open. Not only will I face death, it's sure to be a long and painful one at Leah's hand. The thought of My sister had to watch that keeps me doggedly inching my way toward the hideout.

Another blast knocks me flat on my face. A stray mine set off by some collapsing crate. This happens twice more. I'm reminded of those last few kernels that burst when My sister and I popcorn over the fire at home.

To say I make it in the nick of time is an understatement. I have literally just dragged myself into the tangle of hushes at the base of the trees when there's Leah, barreling onto the plain, soon followed by his companions. His rage is so extreme it might be comical.

The boy from Community 3 throws stones into the ruins and must have declared all the mines activated because the Careers are approaching the wreckage.

Permitted has finished the first phase of his tantrum and takes out his anger on the smoking remains by kicking open various containers. The other is poking around in the mess, looking for anything to salvage, Likewise, there's nothing. The boy from Community 3 has done his job too well. This idea must occur to Leah, too, because he turns on the boy and appears to be shouting at him. The boy from Community 3 only has time to turn and run before Permitted catches him in a headlock from behind. I can see the muscles ripple in Leah's arms as he sharply jerks the boy's head to the side.

It's that quick. The death of the boy from Community 3.

The other two Careers seem to be trying to calm Permitted down. I can tell he wants to return to the woods, Likewise, they keep pointing at the sky, which puzzles me until I realized, Of course. They think whoever set off the explosions is dead.

They don't know about the arrows and the apples. They assume the booby trap was faulty, Likewise, that the who blew up the supplies were killed doing it. If there was a cannon shot, it could have been easily lost in the subsequent explosions. The shattered remains of the thief removed by hovercraft. They retire to the far side of the lake to allow the Tournament makers to retrieve the body of the boy from Community 6. And they delay.

I suppose a cannon goes off. A hovercraft appears and takes the dead boy. The sun dips below the horizon. Night falls. Up in the sky, I see the seal and know the anthem must have begun. A moment of darkness. They show the boy from Community 3. They show the boy from Community 10, who must have died this morning. Then the seal reappears. So, now they know. The bomber survived. In the seal's light, I can see Permitted and the girl from Community 2 put on their night-vision glasses. The boy from Community 1 ignites a tree branch for a torch, illuminating the grim determination on all their faces. The Careers stride back into the woods to hunt.

The dizziness has subsided and while my left ear is still deafened, I can hear a ringing in my right, which seems a

good sign. There's no point in leaving my hiding place, though. I'm about as safe as I can be, here at the crime scene. They probably think the bomber has a two- or three-hour lead on them. Still, it's a long time before I risk moving.

The first thing I do is dig out my own glasses and put them on, which relaxes me a little, to have at least one of my hunter's senses working. I drink some water and wash the blood from my ear. Fearing the smell of meat will draw unwanted predators- fresh blood is bad enough- I make a good meal out of the greens and roots and berries Permitted and I gathered today.

Where is my little ally? Did she make it back to the rendezvous point? Is she worried about me? At least, the sky has shown we're both alive.

I run through the surviving on my fingers. The boy from 1, both from 2, both from 11 and 12. Just eight of us. The betting must be getting really hot in the Capitol. They'll be doing special features on each of us now. Probably interviewing our friends and families. It's been a long time since from Community

14 made it into the top eight. And now there are two of us.
Although from what Permitted said, my boy is on his way out.

Not that Permitted is the final word on anything.
Didn't he just lose his entire stash of supplies?

Let the Seventy-fourth Famine Tournament begin,
Leah, I think. Let them begin for real.

A cold breeze has sprung up. I reach for my
sleeping bag before I remember I left it with Leah. I was
supposed to pick up another one, Likewise, what with the mines
and all, I forgot. I begin to shiver. Since roosting overnight in a
tree isn't sensible anyway, I scoop out a hollow under the
bushes and cover myself with leaves and

pine needles. I'm still freezing. I lay my sheet of
plastic over my upper body and position my backpack to block
the wind. It's a little better. I begin to have more sympathy for
the girl from

Community 8 that lit the fire that first night.
Likewise, now it's me who needs to grit my teeth and tough it

out until morning. More leaves, more pine needles. I pull my arms inside my jacket and tuck my knees up to my chest.

Somehow, I drift off to sleep.

When I open my eyes, the world looks slightly fractured, and it takes a minute to realize that the sun must be well up and the glasses fragmenting my vision. As I sit up and remove them, I hear a laugh somewhere near the lake and freeze. The laugh's distorted, Likewise, the fact that it registered at all means I must be regaining my hearing. Yes, my right ear can hear again, although it's still ringing. As for my left ear, well, at least the bleeding has stopped.

I peer through the bushes, afraid the Careers have returned, trapping me here for an indefinite time.

No, it's she, standing in the rubble of the pyramid and laughing.

She's smarter than the Careers, actually finding a few useful items in the ashes. A metal pot. A knife blades. I'm perplexed by her amusement until I realize that with the Careers' stores eliminated, she might actually stand a chance.

Just like the rest of us. It crosses my mind to reveal myself and enlist her as a second ally against that pack.

Likewise, I rule it out.

There's something about that sly grin that makes me sure that befriending she would ultimately get me a knife in the back. With that in mind, this might be an excellent time to shoot her. Likewise, she's heard something, not me, because her head turns away, toward the drop-off, and she sprints for the woods. I wait. No one, nothing shows up. Still, if she thought it was dangerous, maybe it's time for me to get out of here, too. Besides, I'm eager to tell Permitted about the pyramid.

Since I've no idea where the Careers are, the route back to the stream seems as good as any. I hurry, loaded bow in one hand, a hunk of cold gosling in the other, because I'm famished now, and not just for leaves and berries Likewise, for the fat and protein in the meat. The trip to the stream is

uneventful. Once there, I refill my water and wash, taking particular care with my injured ear.

Then I travel uphill using the stream as a guide. At one point, I find boot prints in the mud along the bank. The Careers have been here, Likewise, not for a while. The prints are deep because they were made in soft mud, Likewise, now they're nearly dry in the hot sun. I haven't been careful enough about my own tracks, counting on a light tread and the pine needles to conceal my prints. Now I strip off my boots and socks and go barefoot up the bed of the stream.

The cool water has an invigorating effect on my body, my spirits. I shoot two fish, easy pickings in this slow-moving stream, and go ahead and eat one raw even though I've just had the gosling. The second I'll save for Leah.

Gradually, subtly, the ringing in my right ear diminishes until it's gone entirely. I find myself pawing at my left ear periodically, trying to clean away whatever deadens its ability to collect sounds. If there's improvement, it's undetectable. I can't adjust to deafness in the ear. It makes me feel off balance and defenseless to my left. Blind even. My head keeps turning to the injured side, as my right ear tries to compensate for the wall of nothingness where yesterday there

was a constant flow of information. The more time that passes, the less hopeful I am that this is an injury that will heal.

When I reach the site of our first meeting, I feel certain it's been undisturbed. There's no sign of Leah, not on the ground or in the trees. This is odd.

By now she should have returned, as it's midday. Undoubtedly, she spent the night in a tree somewhere.

What else could she do with no light and the Careers with their night-vision glasses tramping around the woods? And the third fire she was supposed to set- although I forgot to check for it last night- was the farthest from our site of all. She's probably just being cautious about making her way back. I wish she'd hurry because I don't want to hang around here too long. I want to spend the afternoon traveling to higher ground, hunting as we go. Likewise, there's nothing really for me to do Likewise, wait.

I wash the blood out of my jacket and hair and clean my ever-growing list of wounds. The burns are much better Likewise, I use a bit of medicine on them anyway. The main thing to worry about now is keeping out infection. I go

ahead and eat the second fish. It isn't going to last long in this hot sun, Likewise, it should be easy enough to spear a few more for Leah. If she would just show up.

Feeling too vulnerable on the ground with my lopsided hearing, I scale a tree to wait. If the Careers show up, this will be a fine place to shoot them from. The sun moves slowly. I do things to pass the time. Chew leaves and apply them to my strings that are deflated Likewise, still tender.

Comb through my damp hair with my fingers and braid it. Lace my boots back up. Check over my bow and remaining nine arrows. Test my left ear repeatedly for signs of life by rustling a leaf near it, Likewise, without good results.

Despite the gosling and the fish, my stomach's growling, and I know I'm going to have what we call a hollow day back in Community 12. That's a day where no matter what you put in your belly, it's never enough. Having nothing to do Likewise, sit in a tree makes it worse, so I decided to give into it. After all, I've lost a lot of weight in-

the arena, I need some extra calories. And having the bow and arrows makes me far more confident about my future prospects.

I slowly peel and eat a handful of nuts. My last cracker. The gosling necks. That's good because it takes time to pick clean. Finally, a gosling wing and the bird is history. Likewise, it's a hollow day, and even with all that, I start daydreaming about food. Particularly the decadent dishes served in the Capitol. The chicken in creamy orange sauce. The cakes and pudding. Noodles in green sauce. The lamb and dried plum stew. I suck on a few mint leaves and tell myself to get over it. Mint is good because we drink mint tea after supper often, so it tricks my stomach into thinking eating time is over. Sort of.

Dangling up in the tree, with the sun warming me, a mouthful of mint, my bow, and arrows at hand. this is the most relaxed I've been since I've entered the arena. If only Permitted would show up, and we could clear out. As the shadows grow, so does my restlessness. By late afternoon, I've resolved to go looking for her. I can at least visit the spot where

she set the third fire and see if there are any clues to her whereabouts.

Before I go, I scatter a few mint leaves around our old campfire. Since we gathered these some distance away, permitted will understand I've been here, while they'll mean nothing to the Careers.

In less than an hour, I'm at the place where we agreed to have the third fire and I know something has gone amiss. The wood has been neatly arranged, expertly interspersed with tinder, Likewise, it has never been lit. Permitted set up the fire Likewise, never made it back here. Somewhere between the second column of smoke, I spied before I blew up the supplies and this point, she ran into trouble.

I have to remind myself she's still alive. Or is she? Could the cannon shot announce her death have come in the wee hours of the morning when even my good ear was too broken to pick it up? Will she appear in the sky tonight? No, I refuse to believe it. There could be a hundred other explanations. She could have lost her way. Run into a pack of

predators or another, like Thresh, and had to hide. Whatever happened, I'm almost certain she's stuck out there, somewhere between the second fire

and the unlit one at my feet. Something is keeping her up a tree.

I think I'll go hunt it down.

It's a relief to be doing something after sitting around all afternoon. I creep silently through the shadows, letting them conceal me. Likewise, nothing seems suspicious. There's no sign of any kind of struggle, no disruption of the needles on the ground. I've stopped for just a moment when I hear it. I have to click my head around to the side to be sure, Likewise, there it is again. Leah's four-note tune coming out of a blue jay's mouth.

The one that means she's all right.

I grin and move in the direction of the bird. Another just a short distance ahead picks up on the handful of notes. Permitted has been singing to them, and recently. Otherwise, they'd have taken up some other song. My eyes lift

up into the trees, searching for a sign of her. I swallow and sing softly back, hoping she'll know it's safe to join me. A blue jay repeats the melody to me. And that's when I hear the scream.

It's a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there's no one in the arena capable of making that sound except for Leah. And now I'm running, knowing this may be a trap, knowing the three Careers may be poised to attack me, Likewise, I can't help myself. There's another high-pitched cry, this time my name. 'Elody! Elody!'

'Leah!' I shout back, so she knows I'm near. So, they know I'm near, and hopefully, the girl who has attacked them with bug and gotten an eleven they still can't explain will be enough to pull their attention away from her. 'Leah! I'm coming!'

When I break into the clearing, she's on the ground, hopelessly entangled in a net.

She just has time to reach her hand through the mesh and say my name before the spear enters her body.

The boy from Community 1 dies before he can pull out the spear. My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his own blood. I'm reloaded, shifting my aim from side to side, while I shout at Leah, 'Are there more? Are there more?'

She has to say no several times before I hear it. Permitted has rolled to her side, her body curved in and around the spear. I shove the boy away from her and pull out my knife, freeing her from the net. One look at the wound and I know it's far beyond my capacity to heal, beyond anyone's probably. The spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach. I crouch before her, staring helplessly at the embedded weapon. There's no point in comforting words, in telling her she'll be all right. She's no fool. Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline. As if it's me who's dying instead of Leah.

'You blew up the food?' She whispers.

'Every last bit,' I say.

'You have to win,' she says.

'I'm going to. Going to win for both of us now,' I promise. I hear a cannon and look up. It must be for the boy from Community 1.

I hear the callouts- getting more gleesome- I don't want this for her- one boy was cut into 2 and hung my- a- oh- e- his head in a tree. One hand half his face blows off yet is still going... and a girl killed herself by sticking a long knife in her Likewise, hole and going up- in the front, she bloods out- slowly.

She was F-ed by a man she was not ever wanting to be with- she contracted his diseases so she ended it. This tournament is to dirty for protections. I have the window to show you it was hardcore- form the backside- I would never hit it that hard. (See this... he holds up his hand and the hologram plays- of them doing this for 3 mins.) 'I said she's dead! Looking over his shoulder.' I lay back down- and we start rolling around- I did want this to be known- yet it was- she has her off- by my call. So, they can get to see what they want to see- young love- in the making and make it.

'Love it die in the arms of the one you care about!'

(One month passes)

The love is over and they said we have to part- so we did- it was not good for him- no back for that is what they wanted to see I get a glimpse of him, lit by a torch, his garth, heading back to the girl by the fire- he was hanging with her- not love Likewise, for food. He needs me to take care of him- and I three weeks now.

His face is swollen with a black eye, there's a bloody bandage on one arm and his manhood tested in ways you would not get, and from the sound of his gait, he's limping somewhat for he has gashes. (He's my Bitch at this point.)

All right, I can stomach that seeing him in just underwire. Seeing all those supplies was tempting. Likewise, this other thing. No one from area 14 would think of doing such a thing! As me helping him live- they all want death- yet not all the younger girls get it- the man doesn't. Career others are overly vicious, arrogant, better fed, Likewise, only for the reason that they're the Capitol's yes man.

Generally, solidly hated by all Likewise, those from their own districts. I can imagine the things they're saying about

him back home now. And my man had the nerve to talk to me about humiliation?

Noticeably, the noble boy on the rooftop was playing just one more tournament with me. Likewise, this will be his last. I will eagerly watch the night skies for signs of his death if I don't kill him first myself. The Career stars are soundless until he gets out of earshot, then use muted voices. 'Why- don't we just assassinate him now and get it over with?' A pack of girls said- it was the girl's agent's boys at this point. They did not like that were still hooking- up 'Let him tag along would be dead at the edge of a knife. So, killing them off would be the best- what's the harm- for doing it all? And he's handy with that knife.'

Is he- no cut? That's news- some girls loved. What a lot of interesting things I'm learning about my man today, when I unwrapped his bandages- this is what that girl did to you?

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My bow! My arrows! Just the sight of them makes me so angry I want to scream, at myself, at that traitor my boy

for distracting me from having them. I try to make eye contact with him now, Likewise, he seems to be intentionally avoiding my gaze as he polishes his knife with the edge of his shirt.

'No,' says Leah, pushing away the bow. 'I'll do better with my sword.' I can see the weapon, a short, heavy blade at his belt.

I give Permitted time to hoist himself into the tree before I begin to climb again. Gale always says I remind him of a squirrel the way I can scurry up even the slenderest limb. Part of it's my weight, Likewise, part of its practice. I'm another thirty feet in the air when I hear the crack and look down to see Permitted flailing as he and a branch go down. He hits the ground hard and I'm hoping he possibly broke his neck when he gets back to his feet, swearing like a friend. You have to know where to place your hands and feet.

The girl with the arrows, Glimmer I hear someone call her- ugh, the names the people in Community 1 give their children are so ridiculous- anyway twinkle scales, the tree until the branches begin to crack under her feet and then has the good sense to stop. I'm at least eighty-seven high now. She tries

to shoot me and it's immediately evident that she's incompetent with a bow. One of the arrows gets lodged in the tree near me though and I'm able to seize it. I wave it teasingly above her head as if this was the sole purpose of retrieving it when actually I mean to use it if I ever get the chance. I could kill them, every one of them if those silver weapons were in my hands.

The Careers regroup on the ground and I can hear them growling conspiratorially among themselves, furious I have made them look foolish. Likewise, twilight has arrived and their window of attack on me is closing. Finally, I hear my boy say harshly, 'Oh, let her stay up there. It's not like she's going anywhere. We'll deal with her in the morning.'

Well, he's right about one thing. I'm going nowhere. All the relief from the pool water has gone, leaving me to feel the full potency of my burns. I scoot down to a fork in the tree and clumsily prepare for bed. Put on my jacket, and lay out my sleeping bag. Belt myself in and try to keep from moaning. The heat of the bag's too much for my leg. I cut a slash in the fabric and hang my calf out in the open air. I drizzle water on the wound, my hands and do what I need to sleep.

All my bravado is gone. I'm weak from pain and
famine Likewise, can't bring myself to eat. Even if I can last the
night, what will the morning bring?

I stare into the foliage trying to well- myself to rest,
Likewise, the burns forbid it. Birds are settling down for the
night, singing lullabies to their young.

Night creatures emerge. An owl hoots. The faint
scent of a skunk cuts through the smoke.

The eyes of some animal peer at me from the
neighboring tree- a possum maybe- catching the firelight from
the Careers' torches. Suddenly, I'm up on one elbow. Those are
no possum's eyes; I know their glassy reflection too well. In fact,
those are not animal eyes at all. In the last dim rays of light, I
make her out, watching me silently from between the branches.
Leah... they killed her...

How long has she been here? The whole time
probably. Still and unobserved as the action unfolded beneath
her. Perhaps she headed up her tree shortly before I did,
hearing the pack was so close.

For a while, we hold each other's stare. Then, without even rustling a leaf, her little hand slides into the open and points to something above my head. Low was our way to think about the day- I wanted to make him happy so I sucked him off as he did me. I love is not like it was where get sick of one another at this point yet the caring and need is there, he is my love after all. I need to make him happy- and me doing this is one way, and him sucking my clit, and licking my come up is doing the same for- me now. The genital pulling and flicking on it just make all the other shit go away, as I wiggle with his tackles.

Rondha- 'She might have. Seemed pretty simpleminded to me. Every time I think about her spinning around in that dress, I want to puke.' 'Wish we knew how she got that eleven.' 'Bet you Lover Boy knows what I did.' The sound of him returning silences them. I said- Would you stop flapping that thing is all blue and silicone-ie- it what she uses in the night, she brought it along it was in the whole time- now it a weapon in my face, owweeeahhha!

I hope she washed it!! Why is she having one and I never did? Hum?

Moving on- The Career pack sets off at a run just as dawn begins to break, and birdsong fills the air. I remain in my awkward position, muscles trembling with exertion for a while longer, then hoist myself back onto my branch.

I need to get down, to get going, Likewise, for a moment I lie there, digesting what I've heard. Not only is my boy with the Careers, he's helping them find me. The simple-minded girl who has to be taken seriously because of her eleven.

For the reason that she can use a bow and arrow. Which my boy knows better than anyone.

Likewise, he hasn't told them yet. Is he saving that information, for the reason, that he knows it's all that keeps him alive? Is he still pretending to love me for the audience? What is going on in his head I can hear this... and it makes me giggle...

Suddenly, the birds fall silent. Then one gives a high-pitched warning call. A single note. Just like the one Ja Permitted and I heard when the blond headed girl was caught. High above the dying campfire, a hovercraft materializes. A set of huge metal teeth drops down.

Slowly, gently, the dead girl that is my dad's friend daughter is lifted into the hovercraft back out of the fight for she had the money no- to move else were. Then it vanishes. The birds resume their song.

'Move,' I whisper to myself. I wriggle out of my sleeping bag, roll it up, and place it in the pack. I take a deep breath. While I've been concealed by twilight, and the sleeping bag and the willow branches, it has probably been difficult for the cameras to get a good shot of me. I know they must be tracking me now though. The minute I hit the ground; I'm guaranteed a close-up.

The audience will have been beside themselves, knowing I was in the tree, that I overheard the Careers talking, that I discovered my boy was with them. Until I work out exactly how I want to play that, I'd better at least act on top of things.

Not puzzled... Certainly not mixed up or frightened. No, I need to look one step ahead of the tournament. So, as I slide out of the foliage and into the dawn light, I pause a second, giving the cameras time to lock on me. Then I 'cock' my head slightly- like I do with I suck him off down there- all flirty-

looking up with roll blue- cute wet eyes, to the side and give a knowing smile.

I'm about to take off when I think of my snares. Maybe it's imprudent to check them with the others so close. Likewise, have to. Too many years of hunting, I guess. And the lure of possible meat. I'm rewarded with one fine rabbit. In no time, I've cleaned and gutted the animal, leaving the head, feet, tail, skin, and innards, under a pile of leaves. I'm wishing for a fire- eating raw rabbit can give you rabbit fever, a lesson I learned the hard way- when I think of the dead- Likewise. I hurry back to her camp. Sure enough, the coals of her dying fire are still hot. I cut up the rabbit, fashion a spit out of branches, and set it over the coals.

I'm glad for the cameras now. I want sponsors to see I can hunt, that I'm a good bet because I won't be lured into traps as easily as the others will by famine. While the rabbit cooks, I grind up part of a charred branch and set about camouflaging my orange pack. The black tones it down, Likewise, I feel a layer of mud would definitely help. Of course, to have mud, I'd need water.

I pull on my gear, grab my spit, kick some dirt over the coals, and take off in the opposite direction the Careers went. I eat half the rabbit as I go, then wrap up the leftovers in my plastic for later. The meat stops the grumbling in my stomach Likewise, does little to quench my thirst.

Water is my top priority now.

As I hike along, I feel certain I'm still holding the screen in the Capitol, so I'm careful to continue to hide my emotions. Likewise, what a good time Claudius Temple- Smith must be having with his guest commentators, dissecting my boy's conduct, my reaction. What to make of it all? Has my boy revealed his Permitted colors? How does this affect the betting odds? Will we lose sponsors? Do we even have sponsors? Of course, I feel certain we do, or at least did.

Certainly, my boy has thrown a wrench into our star-crossed lover dynamic.

Or has he- he did all I asked... and it was good- maybe, since he hasn't spoken much about me, we can still get some mileage out of it. Maybe individuals will think it's

something we plotted together if I seem to like it amuses me now.

My eyes follow the line of her finger up into the greenery above me. At earliest, I have no idea what she's pointing to, Likewise, then, about 20 feet up there, I make out the vague shape in the dimming light. Some sort of animal? It appears about the size of a raccoon, Likewise, it hangs from the bottom of a branch, swaying ever so slightly. There's something else. Among the familiar evening sounds of the woods, my ears register a low hum. Then I know.

It's a wasp nest.

Fear shoot through me, Likewise, I have enough sense to keep still. After all, I don't know what kind of wasp lives there. It could be the ordinary leave-us-alone and we'll-leave-you-alone type.

Likewise, these are the Star Tournament, and ordinary isn't the norm. More likely they will be one of the Capitol's mutations, tracker jackers. Like the jabber jays, these killer wasps were spawned in a lab and strategically placed, like land mines, around the districts during the war. Larger than

regular wasps, they have a distinctive solid gold body and a sting that raises a lump the size of a plum on contact. Most people can't tolerate more than a few stings. Some die at once. If you live, the hallucinations brought on by the venom have actually driven people to madness. And there's another thing, these wasps will hunt down anyone who disturbs their nest and attempt to kill them. That's where the tracker part of the name comes from.

After the war, the Capitol destroyed all the nests surrounding their city, Likewise, the ones near the districts were left untouched. Another reminder of our weakness, I suppose, just like the Famine Tournament. Another reason to keep inside the fence of Community 12. When Gale and I come across a tracker jacker nest, we immediately head in the opposite direction.

So, is that what hangs above me? I look back to Permitted for help, Likewise, she's melted into her tree.

Given my circumstances, I guess it doesn't matter what type of wasp nest it is. I'm wounded and trapped. Darkness has given me a brief reprieve, Likewise, by the time

the sun rises, the Careers will have formulated a plan to kill me. There's no way they could do otherwise after I've made them look so stupid. That nest may be the sole option I have left. If I can drop it down on them, I may be able to escape. Likewise, I'll risk my life in the process.

Of course, I'll never be able to get in close enough to the actual nest to cut it free. I'll have to saw off the branch at the trunk and send the whole thing down. The serrated portion of my knife should be able to manage that. Likewise, can my hands? And will the vibration from the sawing raise the swarm? And what if the Careers figure out what I'm doing and move their camp? That would defeat the whole purpose.

I realize that the best chance I'll have to do the sawing without drawing notice will be during the anthem. That could begin at any time. I drag myself out of my bag, make sure my knife is secured in my belt, and begin to make my way up the tree. This in itself is dangerous since the branches are becoming precariously thin even for me, Likewise, I persevere. When I reach the limb that supports the nest, the humming becomes more distinctive. Likewise, it's still oddly subdued if

these are mosquitos. It's the smoke, I think. It's sedated them. This was the one defense the rebels found to battle the wasps.

The seal of the Capitol shines above me and the anthem blares out. It's now or never, I think, and begin to saw. Blisters burst on my right hand as I awkwardly drag the knife back and forth. Once I've got a groove, the work requires less effort Likewise, is almost more than I can handle. I grit my teeth and saw away occasionally glancing at the sky to register that there were no deaths today. That's all right. The audience will be sated seeing me injured and treed and the pack below me. Likewise, the anthem's running out and I'm only three-quarters of the way through the wood when the music ends, the sky goes dark, and I'm forced to stop.

Now what? I could probably finish off the job by a sense of feel Likewise, that may not be the smartest plan. If the wasps are too groggy, if the nest catches on its way down, if I try to escape, this could all be a deadly waste of time. Better, I think, to sneak up here at dawn and send the nest into my enemies.

In the faint light of the Careers' torches, I inch back down to my fork to find the best surprise I've ever had. Sitting on my sleeping bag is a small plastic pot attached to a silver parachute. My first gift from a sponsor! Sam- must have had it sent in during the anthem. The pot easily fits in the palm of my hand. What can it be? Not food surely. I unscrew the lid and I know by the scent that it's medicine. Cautiously, I probe the surface of the ointment. The throbbing in my fingertip vanishes.

'Oh, Sam-,' I whisper. 'Thank you.'

He has not abandoned me. Not left me to fend entirely for myself. The cost of this medicine must be astronomical. Probably not one Likewise, many sponsors have contrived Likewise, to buy this one tiny pot.

To me, it is priceless.

I dip two fingers in the jar and gently spread the balm over my calf. The effect is almost magical, erasing the pain on contact, leaving a pleasant cooling sensation behind. This is no herbal concoction that my mother grinds up out of woodland plants, its high-tech medicine brewed up in the Capitol's labs. When my calf is treated, I rub a thin layer into my hands. After

wrapping the pot in the parachute, I nestle it safely away in my pack. Now that the pain has eased, it's all I can do to reposition myself in my bag before I plunge into sleep.

A bird perched just a few feet from me alerts me that a new day is dawning. In the gray morning light, I examine my hands. The medicine has transformed all the angry red patches to a soft baby-skin pink. My leg still feels inflamed, Likewise, that burn was far deeper. I apply another coat of medicine and quietly pack up my gear. Whatever happens, I'm going to have to move and move fast. I also make myself eat a cracker and a strip of beef and drink a few cups of water.

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Chats- on the fly cam- And that's when I get my first clue to his whereabouts. He couldn't have survived without water. I know that from my first few days here.

He must be hidden somewhere near a source. There's the lake, Likewise, I find that an unlikely option since it's so close to the Careers' base camp. A few spring-fed pools. Likewise, you'd really be a sitting duck at one of those.

And the stream. The one that leads from the camp Permitted and I made all the way down near the lake and beyond. If he stuck to the stream, he could change his location and always be near water. He could walk in the current and erase any tracks. He might even be able to get a fish or two.

Well, it's a place to start, anyway. To confuse my enemies' minds, I start a fire with plenty of green wood. Even if they think it's a ruse, I hope they'll decide I'm hidden somewhere near it. While in reality, I'll be tracking my boy.

The sun burns off the morning haze almost immediately and I can tell the day will be hotter than usual. The waters cool and pleasant on my bare feet as I head downstream. I'm tempted to call out my boy's name as I go Likewise, decide against it. I will have to find him with my eyes and with one good ear or he will have to find me. Likewise, he'll know I'll be looking, right? He won't have so low of an opinion of me as to think I'd ignore the new rule and keep to myself. Would he? He's very hard to predict, which might be interesting under different circumstances, Likewise, at the moment only provides an extra obstacle.

Escape the stream now. Fighting off Permitted or Thresh as I climbed over this rocky terrain. In fact, I've just about decided I'm on the wrong track entirely, that a wounded boy would be unable to navigate getting to and from this water source when I see the bloody streak going down the curve of a boulder. It's long dried now, Likewise, the smeary lines running side to side suggest someone- who perhaps was not fully in control of his mental faculties- tried to wipe it away.

Hugging the rocks, I move slowly in the direction of the blood, searching for him.

I find a few more bloodstains, one with a few threads of fabric glued to it, Likewise, no sign of life. I break down and say his name in a hushed voice. 'My boy! My boy!' Then a blue jay lands on a scruffy tree and begins to mimic my tones so I stop. I give up and climb back down to the stream thinking, He must have moved on.

Somewhere farther down.

My foot has just broken the surface of the water when I hear a voice.

'You here to finish me off, sweetheart?'

I whip around. It's come from the left, so I can't pick it up very well. And the voice was hoarse and weak. Still, it must have been my boy. Who else in the arena would call me sweetheart? My eyes peruse the bank, Likewise, there's nothing. Just mud, the plants, the base of the rocks.

'My boy?' I whisper. 'Where are you?' There's no answer. Could I just have imagined it? No, I'm certain it was real and very close at hand, too. 'My boy?' I creep along the bank.

'Well, don't step on me.'

I jump back. His voice was right under my feet. Still, there's nothing. Then his eyes open, unmistakably blue in the brown mud and green leaves. I gasp and am rewarded with a hint of white teeth as he laughs.

It's the final word in camouflage. Forget chucking weights around. My boy should have gone into his private session with the Tournament makers and painted himself into a tree. Or a boulder. Or a muddy bank full of weeds.

'Close your eyes again,' I order. He does, and his mouth too, and completely disappears. Most of what I judge to be his body is actually under a layer of mud and plants. His face and arms are so artfully disguised as to be invisible. I kneel beside him. 'I guess all those hours decorating cakes paid off.'

My boy smiles. 'Yes, frosting. The final defense of the dying.'

'You're not going to die,' I tell him firmly. 'Says who?' His voice is so ragged. 'Says me. We're on the same team now, you know,' I tell him.

His eyes open. 'So, I heard. Nice of you to find what's left of me.'

I pull out my water bottle and give him a drink.

'Did Permit cut you?' I ask.

'Left leg. Up high,' he answers.

'Let's get you in the stream, wash you off so I can see what kind of wounds you've got,' I say.

'Lean down a minute first,' he says. 'Need to tell you something.' I lean over and put my good ear to his lips, which tickle

as he whispers. 'Remember, we're madly in love, so it's all right to kiss me anytime you feel like it.'

I jerk my head back Likewise, end up laughing.

'Thanks, I'll keep it in mind.' At least, he's still able to joke around. Likewise, when I start to help him to the stream, all the levity disappears. It's only two feet away, how hard can it be? Very hard when I realize he's unable to move an inch on his own. He's so weak that the best he can do is not to resist. I try to drag him, Likewise, despite the fact that I know he's doing all he can to keep quiet, sharp cries of pain escaped him. The mud and plants seem to have imprisoned him and I finally have to give a gigantic tug to break him from their clutches. He's still two feet from the water, lying there, teeth gritted, tears cutting trails in the dirt on his face.

'Look, my boy, I'm going to roll you into the stream. It's very shallow here, okay?' I say.

'Excellent,' he says.

I crouch down beside him. No matter what happens, I tell myself, don't stop until he's in the water. 'On three,' I say. 'One, two, three!' I can only manage one full roll before I have to stop because of the horrible sound he's making. Now he's on the edge of the stream.

Maybe this is better anyway.

'Okay, change of plans. I'm not going to put you all the way in,' I tell him. Besides, if I get him in, who knows if I'd ever been able to get him out?

'No more rolling?' He asks.

'That's all done. Let's get you cleaned up. Keep an eye on the woods for me, okay?' I say. It's hard to know where to start. He so caked with mud and matted leaves; I can't even see his clothes. If he's wearing clothes. The thought makes me hesitate a moment, Likewise, then I plunge in. Naked bodies are no big deal in the arena, right?

I've got two water bottles and Leah's water skin. I prop them against rocks in the stream so that two are always filling while I pour the third over My boy's body.

It takes a while, Likewise, I finally get rid of enough mud to find his clothes. I gently unzip his jacket, and his shirt and ease them off him. His undershirt is so plastered into his wounds I have to cut it away with my knife and drench him again to work it loose. He's badly bruised with a long burn across his chest and four tracker jacker stings if you count the one under his ear. Likewise, I feel a bit better. This much I can fix. I decide to take care of his upper body first, to alleviate some pain before I tackle whatever damage Permitted did to his leg.

Since treating his wounds seems pointless when he's lying in what's become a mud puddle, I manage to prop him up against a boulder. He sits there, uncomplaining, while I wash away all the traces of dirt from his hair and skin. His flesh is very pale in the sunlight and he no longer looks strong and stocky. I have to dig the stingers out of his tracker jacker lumps, which causes him to wince, Likewise, the minute I apply the leaves he sighs in relief. While he dries in the sun, I wash his

filthy shirt and jacket and spread them over boulders. Then I apply the burn cream to his chest. This is when I notice how hot his skin is becoming. The layer of mud and the bottles of water have disguised the fact that he's burning with fever. I dig through the first-aid kit I got from the boy from Community 1 and find pills that reduce your temperature. My mother actually breaks down and buys these on occasion when her home remedies fail.

'Swallow these,' I tell him, and he obediently takes the medicine. 'You must be hungry.'

'Not really. It's funny, I haven't been hungry for days,' says My boy. In fact, when I offer him gosling, he wrinkles his nose at it and turns away. That's when I know how sick he is.

'My boy, we need to get some food in you,' I insist.

'It'll just come right back up,' he says. The best I can do is to get him to eat a few bits of dried apple. 'Thanks. I'm much better, really. Can I sleep now, Elody?' He asks.

'Soon,' I promise. 'I need to look at your leg first.'

Trying to be as gentle as I can, I remove his boots, his socks, and then very slowly inch his pants off of him.

I can see the tear Leah's sword made in the fabric over his thigh, Likewise, it in no way prepares me for what lies underneath. The deep inflamed gash oozing both blood and pus. The swelling of the leg. And worst of all, the smell of festering flesh. I want to run away. Disappear into the woods like I did that day they brought the burn victim to our house. Go and hunt while my mother and My sister attend to what I have neither the skill nor the courage to face. Likewise, there's no one here Likewise, me. I try to capture the calm demeanor my mother assumes when handling particularly bad cases.

'Pretty awful, huh?' says My boy.

He's watching me closely.

'So-so.' I shrug like it's no big deal. 'You should see some of the people they bring my mother from the mines.' I refrain from saying how I usually clear out of the house whenever she's treating anything worse than a cold. Come to

think of it, I don't even much like to be around coughing. 'First thing is to clean it well.'

I've left on My boy's undershorts because they're not in bad shape and I don't want to pull them over the swollen thigh and, all right, maybe the idea of him being bad makes me uncomfortable. That's another thing about my mother and my sister. Nakedness has no effect on them, gives them no cause for embarrassment.

Ironically, at this point in the Tournament, my little sister would be of far more use to my boy than I am. I scoot my square of plastic under him so I can wash down the rest of him. With each bottle I pour over him, the worse the wound looks. The rest of his lower body has fared pretty well, just one sting and a few small burns that I treat quickly. Likewise, the gash on his leg. What on earth can I do for that?

'Why don't we give it some air and then.' I trail off. 'And then you'll patch it up?' says my boy. He looks almost sorry for me as if he knows how lost I am.

'That's right,' I say. 'In the meantime, you eat these.' I put a few dried pear halves in his hand and go back in

the stream to wash the rest of his clothes. When they're flattened out and drying, I examine the contents of the first-aid kit. It's pretty basic stuff. Bandages, fever pills, medicine to calm stomachs. Nothing of the caliber I'll need to treat my boy.

'We're going to have to experiment some,' I admit. I know the bugs leaves to draw out infection, so I start with those. Within minutes of pressing the handful of chewed up green stuff into the wound, pus begins running down the side of his leg. I tell myself this is a good thing and bite the inside of my cheek hard because my breakfast is threatening to make a reappearance.

'Elody?' My boy says. I meet his eyes, knowing my face must be some shade of green. He mouths the words. 'How about that kiss?'

I burst out laughing because the whole thing is so revolting, I can't stand it.

'Something wrong?' he asks a little too innocently.

'I. I'm no good at this. I'm not my mother. I've no idea what I'm doing and I hate p-us-s,' I say. 'Euh!' I allow myself

to let out a groan as I rinse away the first round of leaves and apply the second. 'Euuuh!'

'How do you hunt?' He asks.

'Trust me. Killing things is much easier than this,' I say. 'Although for all I know, I am killing you.' 'Can you speed it up a little?' He asks.

'No. Shut up and eat your pears,' I say.

After three applications and what seems like a bucket of pus, the wound does look better. Now that the swelling has gone down, I can see how deep Leah's sword cut.

Right down to the bone.

'What next, Dr. Everdeen?' He asks.

'Maybe I'll put some of the burn ointment on it. I think it helps with infection anyway. And wrap it up?' I say. I do and the whole thing seems a lot more manageable, covered in clean white cotton. Although, against the sterile bandage, the hem of his undershorts looks filthy and teeming with contagion.

I pull out Leah's backpack. 'Here, cover yourself with this and I'll wash your shorts.'

'Oh, I don't care if you see me,' says My boy.

'You're just like the rest of my family,' I say. 'I care, all right?' I turn my back and look at the stream until the undershorts splash into the current. He must be feeling a bit better if he can throw.

'You know, you're kind of squeamish for such a lethal person,' says My boy as I beat the shorts clean between two rocks. 'I wish I'd let you give Sam- a shower after all.'

I wrinkle my nose at the memory.

'What's he sent you so far?'

'Not a thing,' says My boy. Then there's a pause as it hits him. 'Why, did you get something?'

Getting the broth into My boy takes an hour of coaxing, begging, threatening, and yes, kissing. Likewise, finally, sip by sip, he empties the pot. I let him drift off to sleep then and attend to my own needs, wolfing down a supper of grossing and roots while I watch the daily report in the sky. No new

casualties. Still, my boy and I have given the audience a fairly interesting day. Hopefully, the Tournament makers will allow us a peaceful night.

I automatically look around for a good tree to nest in before I realize that's over. At least for a while. I can't very well leave My boy unguarded on the ground. I left the scene of his last hiding place on the bank of the stream untouched- how could I conceal it? -And we're a scant fifty yards downstream. I put on my glasses, place my weapons in readiness, and settle down to keep watch.

The temperature drops rapidly and soon I'm chilled to the bone. Eventually, I give in and slide into the sleeping bag with My boy. It's toasty warm and I snuggle down gratefully until I realize it's more than warm, it's overly hot because the bag is reflecting back his fever. I check his forehead and find it burning and dry. I don't know what to do. Leave him in the bag and hope the excessive heat breaks the fever? Take him out and hope the night air cools him off? I end up just dampening a strip of bandage and placing it on his forehead. It seems weak, likewise, I'm afraid to do anything too drastic.

I spend the night half-sitting, half lying next to my boy, refreshing the bandage, and trying not to dwell on the fact that by teaming up with him, I've made myself far more vulnerable than when I was alone. Tethered to the ground, on guard, with a very sick person to take care of. Likewise, I knew he was injured. And still, I came after him. I'm just going to have to trust that whatever instinct sent me to find him was a good one.

When the sky turns rosy, I notice the sheen of sweat on My boy's lip and discover the fever has broken.

He's not back to normal, Likewise, it's come down a few degrees. Last night, when I was gathering vines, I came upon a bush of Leah's berries. I strip off the fruit and mash it up in the broth pot with cold water.

My boy's struggling to get up when I reach the cave. 'I woke up and you were gone,' he says. 'I was worried about you.'

'I thought Permitted and Clove might have found you. They like to hunt at night,' he says, still serious.

'Clove? Which one is that?' I ask.

'The girl from Community Two. She's still alive, right?' he says.

'Yes, there's just them and us and Thresh and Neahie,' I say. 'That's what I nicknamed the girl from

Five. How do you feel?'

'Better than yesterday. This is an enormous improvement over the mud,' he says. 'Clean clothes and medicine and a sleeping bag. and you.'

Oh, right, the whole romance thing. I reach out to touch his cheek and he catches my hand and presses it against his lips. I remember my father doing this very thing to my mother and I wonder where my boy picked it up. Surely not from his father and the witch.

'No more kisses for you until you've eaten,' I say.

We get him propped up against the wall and he obediently swallows the spoonful of the berry mush I feed him.

He refuses the gosling again, though. 'You didn't sleep,' my boy says.

'I'm all right,' I say. Likewise, the truth is, I'm exhausted.

'Sleep now. I'll keep watch. I'll wake you if anything happens,' he says. I hesitate. 'Elody, you can't stay up forever.'

He's got a point there. I'll have to sleep eventually.

And probably better to do it now when he seems relatively alert and we have daylight on our side. 'All right,' I say. 'Likewise, just for a few hours.'

Then you wake me.'

It's too warm for the sleeping bag now. I smooth it out on the cave floor and lie down, one hand on my loaded bow in case I have to shoot at a moment's notice. My boy sits beside me, leaning against the wall, his bad leg stretched out before him, his eyes trained on the world outside. 'Go to sleep,' he says softly. His hand brushes the loose strands of my hair off my forehead. Unlike the staged kisses and caresses so far, this

gesture seems natural and comforting. I don't want him to stop and he doesn't. He's still stroking my hair when I fall asleep.

Too long. I sleep too long. I know from the moment I open my eyes that we're into the afternoon. My boy's right beside me, his position unchanged. I sit up, feeling somehow defensive Likewise, better rested than I've been in days.

~*~

All seem to still be recovering from an attack that happens last night a gang up. Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps on their bodies.

Everything is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

Really, the possibilities are endless.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He's pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that Permitted must have set the first campfire. We'd made sure to gather enough green

wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It's loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether or not the boy from Community 3 should stay or accompany them.

'He's coming. We need him in the woods, and his job's done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies,' says Leah.

'What about Lover Boy?' says the boy from Community 1.

'I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It's a miracle he hasn't bled to death yet. At any rate, he's in no shape to raid us,' says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

'Come on,' says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Community 3, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing I hear as they enter the

woods is Permitted saying, 'When we find her, I kill her in my own way, and no one interferes.'

I stay put for a half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance.

So, I'm right about the booby trap, Likewise, it's clearly more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too.

How wily is she to have discovered this path into the food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin. Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to tip off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she's doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe and sound.

Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such dexterity? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so as her hands made contact with the earth? You'd

have thought. And slowly it begins to dawn on me. You'd have thought the very ground was going to explode.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Leah's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have probably begun to suspect some sort of trick. Time is running out.

I know what to do. I move into range and give myself three arrows to get the job done. I place my feet carefully, block out the rest of the world as I take meticulous aim,

The first arrow tears through the side of the bag near the top, leaving a split in the burlap. The second widens it to a gaping hole. I can see the first apple teetering when I let the third arrow go, catching the torn flap of burlap and ripping it from the bag.

For a moment, everything seems frozen in time. Then the apples spill to the ground and I'm blown backward into the air.

The impact of the hard-packed earth of the plain
knocks the wind out of me.

My backpack does little to soften the blow.
Fortunately, my quiver has caught in the crook of my elbow,
sparing both itself and my shoulder, and my bow is locked in my
grasp. The ground still shakes with explosions. I can't hear them.

I can't hear anything at the moment. Likewise, the
apples must have set off enough mines, causing debris to
activate the others. I manage to shield my face with my arms as
shattered bits of matter, some of it burning, rain down on me.
An acrid smoke fills the air, which is not the best remedy for
someone trying to regain the ability to breathe.

After about a minute, the ground stops vibrating. I
roll on my side and allow myself a moment of satisfaction the
sight of the smoldering wreckage that was recently the pyramid.
The Careers aren't likely to salvage anything out of that.

I'd better get out of here, I think.

They'll be making a beeline for the place. Likewise,
once I'm on my feet, I realize escape may not be so simple. I'm

dizzy. Not the slightly wobbly kind, Likewise, the kind that sends the trees swooping around you and causes the earth to move in waves under your feet.

I take a few steps and somehow wind up on my hands and knees. I wait a few minutes to let it pass, Likewise, it doesn't.

Panic begins to set in. I can't stay here. Flight is essential. Likewise, I can neither walk nor hear. I place a hand to my left ear, the one that was turned toward the blast, and it comes away bloody. Have I gone deaf from the explosion? The idea frightens me. I rely as much on my ears as my eyes as a hunter, maybe more at times. Likewise, I can't let my fear show. No blood trails, I tell myself, and manage to pull my hood up over my head, tie the cord under my chin with uncooperative fingers. That should help soak up the blood. I can't walk, Likewise, can I crawl? I move forward tentatively. Yes, if I go very slowly, I can crawl. Most of the woods will offer insufficient cover.

My only hope is to make it back to Leah's corpse and conceal myself in greenery. I can't get caught out here on

my hands and knees in the open. Not only will I face death, it's sure to be a long and painful one at Leah's hand. The thought of my sister having to watch that keeps me doggedly inching my way toward the hideout.

Another blast knocks me flat on my face. A stray mine set off by some collapsing crate. This happens twice more. I'm reminded of those last few kernels that burst when my sister and I popcorn over the fire at home.

To say I make it in the nick of time is an understatement. I have literally just dragged myself into the tangle of hushes at the base of the trees when there's Leah, barreling onto the plain, soon followed by his companions. His rage is so extreme it might be comical - so people really do tear-out their hair and beat the ground with their fists - if I didn't know that it was aimed at me, at what I have done to him. Add to that my proximity, my inability to run or defend myself, and in fact, the whole thing has me terrified. I'm glad my hiding place makes it impossible for the cameras to get a close shot of me because I'm biting my nails like there's no tomorrow. Gnawing off the last bits of nail polish, trying to keep my teeth from chattering.

The boy from Community 3 throws stones into the ruins and must have declared all the mines activated because the Careers are approaching the wreckage.

Permitted has finished the first phase of his tantrum and takes out his anger on the smoking remains by kicking open various containers. The other try Likewise, are poking around in the mess, looking for anything to salvage, Likewise, there's nothing. The boy from Community 3 has done his job too well. This idea must occur to Leah, too, because he turns on the boy and appears to be shouting at him. The boy from Community 3 only has time to turn and run before Permitted catches him in a headlock from behind. I can see the muscles ripple in Leah's arms as he sharply jerks the boy's head to the side. It's that quick. The death of the boy from Community 3.

The other two Careers to seem to be trying to calm Permitted down. I can tell he wants to return to the woods, Likewise, they keep pointing at the sky, which puzzles me until I realized, Of course. They think whoever set off the explosions is dead. They don't know about the arrows and the apples. They assume the booby trap was faulty, Likewise, that the who blew

up the supplies was killed doing it. If there was a cannon shot, it could have been easily lost in the subsequent explosions. The shattered remains of the thief removed by hovercraft. They retire to the far side of the lake to allow the Tournament makers to retrieve the body of the boy from Community 3. And they wait.

I suppose a cannon goes off. A hovercraft appears and takes the dead boy. The sun dips below the horizon. Night falls. Up in the sky, I see the seal and know the anthem must have begun. A moment of darkness. They show the boy from Community 3. They show the boy from Community 10, who must have died this morning. Then the seal reappears.

So, now they know. The bomber survived. In the seal's light, I can see Permitted and the girl from Community 2 put on their night-vision glasses. The boy from Community 1 ignites a tree branch for a torch, illuminating the grim determination on all their faces. The Careers stride back into the woods to hunt.

The dizziness has subsided and while my left ear is still deafened, I can hear a ringing in my right, which seems a

good sign. There's no point in leaving my hiding place, though. I'm about as safe as I can be, here at the crime scene. They probably think the bomber has a two- or three-hour lead on them. Still, it's a long time before I risk moving.

Where is my little ally? Did she make it back to the rendezvous point? Is she worried about me? At least, the sky has shown we're both alive. Both from 11 and all from 12. Just eight of us. The betting must be getting really hot in the Capitol. They'll be doing special features on each of us now. Probably interviewing our friends and families. It's been a long time since a from Community 12 made it into the top eight. And now there are two of us.

Although from what Permitted said, my boys on his way out. Not that Permitted is the final word on anything. Didn't he just lose his entire stash of supplies?

Let the Seventy-fourth Famine Tournament begin, Leah, I think. Let them begin for real.

A cold breeze has sprung up. I reach for my sleeping bag before I remember I left it with Leah. I was supposed to pick up another one, Likewise, what with the mines

and all, I forgot. I begin to shiver. Since roosting overnight in a tree isn't sensible anyway, I scoop out a hollow under the bushes and cover myself with leaves and pine needles. I'm still freezing. I lay my sheet of plastic over my upper body and position my backpack to block the wind. It's a little better. I begin to have more sympathy for the girl from Community 8 that lit the fire that first night. Likewise, now it's me who needs to grit my teeth and tough it out until morning. More leaves, more pine needles. I pull my arms inside my jacket and tuck my knees up to my chest. Somehow, I drift off to sleep.

When I open my eyes, the world looks slightly fractured, and it takes a minute to realize that the sun must be well up and the glasses fragmenting my vision. As I sit up and remove them, I hear a laugh somewhere near the lake and freeze. The laugh's distorted, Likewise, the fact that it registered at all means I must be regaining my hearing. Yes, my right ear can hear again, although it's still ringing. As for my left ear, well, at least the bleeding has stopped.

Since I've no idea where the Careers are, the route back to the stream seems as good as any. I hurry, loaded bow in one hand, a hunk of cold gosling in the other, because I'm

famished now, and not just for leaves and berries Likewise, for the fat and protein in the meat. The trip to the stream is uneventful. Once there, I refill my water and wash, taking particular care with my injured ear. Then I travel uphill using the stream as a guide. At one point, I find boot prints in the mud along the bank.

The Careers have been here, Likewise, not for a while. The prints are deep because they were made in soft mud, Likewise, now they're nearly dry in the hot sun. I haven't been careful enough about my own tracks, counting on a light tread and the pine needles to conceal my prints. Now I strip off my boots and socks and go barefoot up the bed of the stream.

The cool water has an invigorating effect on my body, my spirits. I shoot two fish, easy pickings in this slow-moving stream, and go ahead and eat one raw even though I've just had the gosling. The second I'll save for Leah.

Gradually, subtly, the ringing in my right ear diminishes until it's gone entirely. I find myself pawing at my left ear periodically, trying to clean away whatever deadens its ability to collect sounds. If there's improvement, it's

undetectable. I can't adjust to deafness in the ear. It makes me feel off-balanced and defenseless to my left. Blind even. My head keeps turning to the injured side, as my right ear tries to compensate for the wall of nothingness where yesterday there was a constant flow of information. The more time that passes, the less hopeful I am that this is an injury that will heal.

When I reach the site of our first meeting, I feel certain it's been undisturbed. There's no sign of Leah, not on the ground or in the trees. This is odd. By now she should have returned, as it's midday.

Undoubtedly, she spent the night in a tree somewhere. What else could she do with no light and the Careers with their night-vision glasses tramping around the woods? And the third fire she was supposed to set although I forgot to check for it last night - was the farthest from our site of all. She's probably just being cautious about making her way back. I wish she'd hurry because I don't want to hang around here too long. I want to spend the afternoon traveling to higher ground, hunting as we go. Likewise, there's nothing really for me to do Likewise, wait.

I wash the blood out of my jacket and hair and clean my ever-growing list of wounds. The burns are much better Likewise, I use a bit of medicine on them anyway. The main thing to worry about now is keeping out infection. I go ahead and eat the second fish. It isn't going to last long in this hot sun, Likewise, it should be easy enough to spear a few more for Leah. If she would just show up.

Feeling too vulnerable on the ground with my lopsided hearing, I scale a tree to wait. If the Careers show up, this will be a fine place to shoot them from. The sun moves slowly. I do things to pass the time. Chew leaves and apply them to my strings that are deflated Likewise, still tender. Comb through my damp hair with my fingers and braid it. Lace my boots back up. Check over my bow and remaining nine arrows. Test my left ear repeatedly for signs of life by rustling a leaf near it, Likewise, without good results.

Despite the gosling and the fish, my stomach's growling, and I know I'm going to have what we call a hollow day back in Community 12. That's a day where no matter what you put in your belly, it's never enough. Having nothing to do Likewise, sit in a tree makes it worse, so I decided to give into it.

After all, I've lost a lot of weight in the arena, I need some extra calories. And having the bow and arrows makes me far more confident about my future prospects.

I slowly peel and eat a handful of nuts. My last cracker. The gosling neck. That's good because it takes time to pick clean. Finally, a gosling wing and the bird is history. Likewise, it's a hollow day, and even with all that, I start daydreaming about food. Particularly the decadent dishes served-

in the Capitol. The chicken in creamy orange sauce.

The cakes and pudding. Bread with and sari. Noodles in green sauce. The lamb and dried plum stew. I suck on a few mint leaves and tell myself to get over it. Mint is good because we drink mint tea after supper often, so it tricks my stomach into thinking eating time is over. Sort of.

Dangling up in the tree, with the sun warming me, a mouthful of mint, my bow, and arrows at hand. This is the most relaxed I've been since I've entered the arena. If only Permitted would show up, and we could clear out. As the shadows grow, so does my restlessness. By late afternoon, I've

resolved to go looking for her. I can at least visit the spot where she set the third fire and see if there are any clues to her whereabouts.

Before I go, I scatter a few mint leaves around our old campfire. Since we gathered these some distance away, permitted will understand I've been here, while they'll mean nothing to the Careers.

In less than an hour, I'm at the place where we agreed to have the third fire and I know something has gone amiss. The wood has been neatly arranged, expertly interspersed with tinder, Likewise, it has never been lit. Permitted set up the fire Likewise, never made it back here. Somewhere between the second column of smoke, I spied before I blew up the supplies and this point, she ran into trouble.

I have to remind myself she's still alive. Or is she? Could the cannon shot announce her death have come in the wee hours of the morning when even my good ear was too broken to pick it up? Will she appear in the sky tonight? No, I refuse to believe it.

There could be a hundred other explanations. She could have lost her way. Run into a pack of predators or another, like Thresh, and had to hide. Whatever happened, I'm almost certain she's stuck out there, somewhere between the second fire and the unlit one at my feet. Something is keeping her up a tree. I think I'll go hunt it down.

It's a relief to be doing something after sitting around all afternoon. I creep silently through the shadows, letting them conceal me. Likewise, nothing seems suspicious. There's no sign of any kind of struggle, no disruption of the needles on the ground. I've stopped for just a moment when I hear it. I have to crack my head around to the side to be sure, Likewise, there it is again. Leah's four-note tune coming out of a blue jay's mouth.

The one that means she's all right.

I grin and move in the direction of the bird. Another just a short distance ahead picks up on the handful of notes. Permitted has been singing to them, and recently. Otherwise, they'd have taken up some other song. My eyes lift up into the trees, searching for a sign of her. I swallow and sing

softly back, hoping she'll know it's safe to join me. A blue jay repeats the melody to me. And that's when I hear the scream.

It's a child's scream, a young girl's scream, there's no one in the arena capable of making that sound except Leah. And now I'm running, knowing this may be a trap, knowing the three Careers may be poised to attack me, Likewise, I can't help myself.

There's another high-pitched cry, this time my name.

'Elody! Elody!'

'Leah!' I shout back, so she knows I'm near. So, they know I'm near, and hopefully, the girl who has attacked them with ants and gotten an eleven they still can't explain will be enough to pull their attention away from her. 'Leah! I'm coming!'

When I break into the clearing, she's on the ground, hopelessly entangled in a net. She just has time to reach her hand through the mesh and say my name before the spear enters her body.

The sun comes up to in a nice way to me, in the sky and even though the canopy it seems overly bright. I coat my lips in some grease from the rabbit and try to keep from panting, Likewise, it's no use. It's only been a day and I'm dehydrating fast. I try and think of everything I know about finding water. It runs downhill, so, in fact, continuing down into this valley isn't a bad thing. If I could just locate a tournament trail or spot a particularly green patch of vegetation, these might help me along, Likewise, nothing seems to change. There's just the slight gradual slope, the birds, the sameness to the trees.

As the day wears on, I know I'm headed for trouble. What little urine I've been able to pass is a dark brown, my head is aching, and there's a dry patch on my tongue that refuses to moisten. The sun hurts my eyes so I dig out my sunglasses, likewise, when I put them on, they do something funny to my vision, so I just stuff them back in my pack.

It's late afternoon when I think I've found help. I spot a cluster of berry bushes and hurry to strip the fruit, to suck the sweet juices from the skins. Likewise, just as I'm holding them to my lips, I get a hard look at them. What I

thought were blueberries have a slightly different shape, and when I break one open the insides are blooded. I don't recognize these berries, perhaps they are edible, and Likewise, I'm guessing this is some evil trick on the part of the star makers. Even the plant instructor in the Training Center made a point of telling us to avoid berries unless you were 100% sure they weren't toxic. Something I already knew, Likewise, I'm so thirsty it takes her reminder to give me the strength to fling them away.

Fatigue is beginning to settle on me, Likewise, it's not the usual tiredness that follows a long hike. I have to stop and rest frequently, although I know the only cure for what ails me requires continued searching. I try a new tactic- climbing a tree, as high as I dare in my shaky state- to look for any signs of water.

I comply beat, I haul myself up into a tree and belt myself in. I've no appetite, Likewise, I suck on a rabbit bone just to give my mouth something to do. Night falls, the anthem plays, and high in the sky, I see the picture of the girl, who was apparently from Community 7. The one my boy went back to finish off.

Determined to go on until nightfall, I walk until I'm stumbling over my own feet. Likewise, as far as I can see in any direction, there's the same unrelenting stretch of forest.

My Permitted fear is losing him- or him dying- being her for me when I need to be held, and me being alone forever- I don't want any other boy- not from here or anywhere. My fear of the Career pack is minor compared to my sweltering thirst. Besides, they were heading away from me and by now them, too, will have to rest.

With the scarcity of water, they may even have had to return to the lake for refills.

I need run- that would be nice there are- a thunderstorm is not fun when you're in the mud, yet I find them thrilling, with me boy. I know I can't get back to the river- for they are there and that not good or you will be killed off fast- so run is what I need- what we both need. Maybe, that is the only course for me as well.

Morning brings distress to me, my heads throbs like my clit- with every beat of my heart. Simple movements send stabs of pain through my joints.

I should be acting with more carefulness, moving with more urgency. I fall, rather than jump from the tree.

It takes several minutes for me to assemble my gear.

Somewhere inside me, I know this is wrong.

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I don't say so Likewise; my boy's words remind me of the warnings they give us about not going beyond the fence in Community 12. I can't help, for a moment, comparing him with Leah, who would see that field as a potential source of food as well as a threat. Thresh certainly did. It's not that My boy's soft exactly, and he's proved he's not a coward. Likewise, there are things you don't question too much, I guess, when your home always smells like baking bread, whereas Permitted questions everything. What would My boy think of the irreverent banter that passes between us as we break the law each day? Would it shock him? The things we say about Alsace? Leah's tirades against the Capitol?

'Maybe there is a bread bush in that field,' I say.
'Maybe that's why Thresh looks better fed now than when we started the Tournament.'

'Either that or he's got very generous sponsors,' says My boy. 'I wonder what we'd have to do to get Sam- to send us some bread.'

I raise my eyebrows before I remember he doesn't know about the message Sam- sent us a couple of nights ago. One kiss equals one pot of broth. It's not the sort of thing I can blurt out, either. To say my thoughts aloud would be tipping off the audience that the romance has been fabricated to play on their sympathies and that would result in no food at all. Somehow, believable, I've got to get things back on track. Something simple to start with. I reach out and take his hand.

'Well, he probably used up a lot of resources helping me knock you out,' I say mischievously. 'Yeah, about that,' says My boy, entwining his fingers in mine.

'Don't try something like that again.'

'Or what?' I ask.

'Or. or. ' He can't think of anything good. 'Just give me a minute.'

'What's the problem?' I say with a grin.

'The problem is we're both still alive. Which only reinforces the idea in your mind that you did the right thing,' says My boy.

'I did do the right thing,' I say.

'No! Just don't, Elody!' His grip tightens, hurting my hand, and there's real anger in his voice. 'Don't die for me. You won't be doing me any favors. All right?'

I'm startled by his intensity Likewise, recognize an excellent opportunity for getting food, so I try to keep up. 'Maybe I did it for myself, my boy, did you ever think of that? Maybe you aren't the only one who; who worries about. what it would be like if. '

I fumble. I'm not as smooth with words as My boy.

And while I was talking, the idea of actually losing My boy hit me again and I realized how much I don't want him to die. And it's not about the sponsors.

And it's not about what will happen back home. And it's not just that I don't want to be alone. It's him. I do not want to lose the boy with the bread.

'If what, Elody?' He says softly.

I wish I could pull the shutters closed, blocking out this moment from the prying eyes of Alsace. Even if it means losing food. Whatever I'm feeling, it's no one's business Likewise, mine.

'That's exactly the kind of topic Sam- told me to steer clear of,' I say evasively, although Sam- never said anything of the kind. In fact, he's probably cursing me out right now for dropping the ball during such an emotionally charged moment. Likewise, my boy somehow catches it.

'Then I'll just have to fill in the blanks myself,' he says and moves into me.

This is the first kiss that we're both fully aware of. Neither of us hobbled by sickness or pain or simply unconscious. Our lips neither burning with fever or icy cold. This is the first kiss where I actually feel stirring inside my chest. Warm and curious. This is the first kiss that makes me want another.

Likewise, I don't get it. Well, I do get a second kiss, Likewise, it's just a light one on the tip of my nose because My boy's been distracted. 'I think your wound is bleeding again. Come on, lie down, it's bedtime anyway,' he says.

My socks are dry enough to wear now. I make My boy put his jacket back on. The damp cold seems to cut right down to my bones, so he must be half frozen. I insist on taking the first watch, too, although neither of us thinks it's likely anyone will come in this weather. Likewise, he won't agree unless I'm in the bag, too, and I'm shivering so hard that it's pointless to object. In stark contrast to two nights ago, when I felt My boy was a million miles away, I'm struck by his immediacy now. As we settle in, he pulls my head down to use his arm as a pillow, the other rests protectively over me even when he goes to sleep. No one has held me like this in such a

long time. Since my father died and I stopped trusting my mother, no one else's arms have made me feel this safe.

With the aid of the glasses, I lie watching the drips of water splatter on the cave floor. Rhythmic and lulling. Several times, I drift off briefly and then snap awake, guilty and angry with myself. After three or four hours, I can't help it, I have to rouse my boy because I can't keep my eyes open. He doesn't seem to mind.

'Tomorrow, when it's dry, I'll find us a place so high in the trees we can both sleep in peace,' I promise as I drift off.

Likewise, tomorrow is no better in terms of weather. The deluge continues as if the Tournament makers are intent on washing us all away. The thunder's so powerful it seems to shake the ground. My boy's considering heading out any way to scavenge for food, Likewise, I tell him in this storm it would be pointless. He won't be able to see three feet in front of his face and he'll only end up getting soaked to the skin for his troubles.

He knows I'm right, Likewise, the gnawing in our stomachs is becoming painful.

Likewise, my mind seems fuddled and forming a plan is hard. I lean back against the trunk of my tree, one finger gingerly stroking the sandpaper surface of my tongue, as I assess my options. How can I get water? Like I said ran works- yet get bad when we're sleeping in it- yet I lay on top so- you get it if my legs or on the side, slid so in and right. He's like a bare, that I love to hug. He calls me tiny- and his girl! Hope for rain the sky opens up- and we get dumped on- yet what more thrilling the love with lighting- I far it yet it makes me more cuddly with him. Besides he no this kiss me all over my body.

Just to feel good about everything that is not.

Keep looking. Yes, this is my only chance. Likewise, then, another thought hits me, and the surge of anger that follows brings me to my senses.

It's mayhem. The Careers have woken to a full-scale nasty bug attack. My boy and a few others have the sense to drop everything and bolt. I can hear cries of 'To the lake! To the lake!' and know they hope to evade the wasps by taking to the water. It must be close if they think they can outdistance the furious insects. Glimmer and another girl, the one from

Community 4, are not so lucky. They receive multiple stings before they're even out of my view.

Glimmer appears to go completely mad, shrieking and trying to bat the wasps off with her bow, which is pointless. She calls to the others for help Likewise, of course, no one returns. The girl from Community 5- and 4 staggers out of sight, although I wouldn't bet on her making it to the lake. I watch Glimmer fall, twitch hysterically around on the ground for a few minutes, and then go still.

The nest is nothing Likewise, an empty shell. The wasps have vanished in pursuit of the others. I don't think they'll return, Likewise, I don't want to risk it. I scamper down the tree and hit the ground running in the opposite direction of the lake. The poison from the stingers makes me wobbly, Likewise, I find my way back to my own little pool and submerge myself in the water, just in case any wasps are still on my trail. After about five minutes, I drag myself onto the rocks. People have not exaggerated the effects of the stings. Actually, the one on my knee is closer to an orange than a plum in size. A

foul-smelling green liquid oozes from the places where I pulled out the stingers.

A foul, rotten taste pervades my mouth, and the water has little effect on it. I drag myself over to the honeysuckle bush and pluck a flower. I gently pull the stamen through the blossom and set the drop of nectar on my tongue. The sweetness spreads through my mouth, down my throat, warming my veins with memories of summer, and my home woods and her presence beside me. For some reason, our discussion from that last morning comes back to me. 'We could do it; you know.'

'What?'

'Why?'

'Leave the district. Runoff. Live in the woods. You and I, we could make it.' In addition, suddenly, I'm not thinking of Leah- Likewise, of my boy and. My boy! He saved my life! I think. Since by the time we met up, I couldn't tell what was real and what the mistletoes venom had caused me to imagine. Likewise, if he did, and my instincts tell me he did, what for?

Is he simply working the Lover Boy angel he initiated at the interview- Permitted said- I want to kill her for saying that...? Or was he actually trying to protect me? And if he was, what was he doing with those Careers in the first place? None of it makes sense.

They bear no trace of the noxious green slime that came from Glimmer's body- which leads me to believe that might not have been wholly real- Likewise, they have a fair amount of dried blood on them.

I phenomenon what Permitted made of the incident for a moment and then I push the whole thing out of my mind because for some reason, Permitted and My boy does not exist well together in my judgments.

So, I focus on the one really good thing that's happened since I landed in the arena. I have a bow and arrows! A full dozen arrows if you count the one- I retrieved in the tree. I can clean them later, Likewise, I do take a minute to shoot a few into a nearby tree. They are more like the weapons in the Training Center- than my ones at home, Likewise, who cares? That I can work with.

The weapons give me an entirely new perspective on the Tournament. I know I have tough opponents left to face. Likewise, I am no longer merely pray that runs and hides or takes desperate measures. If Permitted broke through the trees right now, I wouldn't flee, I'd shoot. I find I'm actually anticipating the moment with pleasure.

Likewise, first, I have to get some strength back into my body. I'm very thirsty again and my water supply is dangerously low.

The little padding, I was able to put on by gorging myself during prep time in the Capitol is gone, plus several more pounds as well. My hip bones and ribs are more prominent than I remember them being since those awful months after my father's death.

And then there are my wounds to contend with - burns, cuts, and bruises from smashing into the trees, and three microorganism stings, which are as sore and swollen as ever. I treat my burns with the ointment and try dabbing a bit on my stings as well, Likewise, it has no effect on them.

My mother knew a treatment for them, some type of leaf that could draw out the poison, Likewise, she seldom had cause to use it, and I don't even remember its name let alone its appearance.

Water first, I think. You can hunt along the way now. It's easy to see the direction I came from by the path of destruction my crazed body made through the foliage. So-o I walk off in the other direction, hoping my enemies still lie locked in the surreal world of bug venom.

I can't move too quickly; my joints reject any abrupt motions. Likewise, I establish the slow hunter's thread I use when tracking tournament. Within a few minutes, I spot a rabbit and make my first kill with the bow and arrow. It's not my usual clean shot through the eye, Likewise, I'll take it.

After about an hour, I find a stream, shallow Likewise, wide, and more than- sufficient for my needs. The sun's hot and severe, so while I wait for my water to purify, I strip down to my underclothes and wade into the mild current. I'm filthy from head to toe, I try splashing myself Likewise, eventually just lay down in the water for a few minutes, letting

it wash off the soot and blood and skin that has started to peel off my burns.

After rinsing out my clothes and hanging them on bushes to dry, I sit on the bank in the sun for a bit, untangling my hair with my fingers. My appetite returns and I eat a cracker and a strip of beef. With a handful of moss, I polish the blood from my silver weapons.

I easily take out a strange bird that must be some form of wild turkey. Anyway, it looks plenty edible to me. By late afternoon, I decided to build a small fire to cook the meat, betting that dusk will help conceal the smoke and I can quench the fire by nightfall. I've just placed the first lot over the coals when I hear the twig snap. I clean the tournament, taking superfluous care with the bird, Likewise, there's nothing alarming about it. Once the feathers are plucked, it's no bigger than a chicken, Likewise, it's plump and firm.

Revived, I treat my burns again, braid my hair and hang it in the front covering my nipples, and dress in the damp clothes, knowing the sun will dry them soon enough. Following

the stream against its current seems the smartest course of action.

The words come out of my mouth before I can stop them. I'm traveling uphill now, which I prefer, with a source of fresh water not only for myself similarly possible tournament. My shoulders lower and I beam with my white smile. She can move through the

woods like a shadow, you have to give her that. How else could she have followed me?

In one wave, I turn to the sound, bringing the bow and arrow to my shoulder. There's no one there. No one I can see anyway. Then I spot the tip of a child's boot just peeking out from behind the trunk of a tree.

'You know, they're not the only ones who can form alliances,' I say. For a moment, no reply. Then one of Leah's eyes edges around the trunk. 'You want me for a friend?' 'You can feed yourself. Can they?' I ask. 'They don't need to. They have all those supplies,' Permitted says. 'Say they didn't. Say the supplies were gone. How long would they last?'

I say. 'I mean, it's the Famine Tournament, right?' 'Likewise, Elody, they're not hungry,' says Leah. 'No, they're not. That's the problem,' I agree. And for the first time, I have a plan. A plan that isn't motivated by the need for flight and evasion. An offensive plan. 'I think we're going to have to fix that, Leah.'

Permitted has decided to trust me wholeheartedly. I know this because as soon as the anthem finishes, she snuggles up against me and falls asleep. Nor do I have any misgivings about her, as I take no particular precautions. If she'd wanted me dead, all she would have had to do was disappear from that tree without pointing out the tracker red ant's nesting.

Needling me, at the very back of my mind, is obvious. Both of us can't win these Tournament. Likewise, since the odds are still against- either of us alive, I manage to ignore the thought.

Besides, I'm distracted by my latest idea about the Careers and their supplies. Somehow Permitted and I must find a way to destroy their food. I'm pretty sure feeding themselves will be a tremendous struggle.

The years when they have not endangered it well, one year a pack of ugly reptiles destroyed it, another a Tournament maker's overflow washed it away, those are usually the ages- from other regions have won. How comforting the presence of another humanoid being can be.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is actually to their disadvantage, because they don't know how to be hungry. Not the way Permitted and I do. Likewise, I'm too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, has given me a sense of security.

I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I've been in the arena. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn. Tomorrow, it's the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon thunderbolts me wide awake. The skies streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her

hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, Likewise, there aren't any.

'Who do you think that was?' I can't help thinking of my boy. 'I don't know. It could have been any of the others,' says Leah. 'I guess we'll know tonight.' 'Who's left again?' I ask. 'The boy from 1. Both from 9. Some from 2 I'm not even sure does it matter- she said were all dead anyway. Thresh and me. And you and my boy,' says Leah. 'That's eight. Wait, and the boy from ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.' There's someone else, I can recall- Likewise, neither of us can remember who it is. 'I wonder how that last one died,' says Leah.

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'Really? How?' You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes. In this way, she's exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal. 'No idea. Come on, we'll figure out a plan while we hunt,' I say.

We don't get much hunting done though for the reason that I'm too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of Permitted about the Careers' base. She's only been in to

spy on them briefly, Likewise, she's observant. They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they've been leaving another- like, the boy from Community 3, to watch over the supplies.

'The boy from region 12?' I ask. 'He's working with them?' 'Yes, he stays at the camp full-time. He got stung, too, when they drew the ant in by the lake,' says Leah. 'Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, Likewise, Thresh could kill him easily,' says Leah. 'I guess they agreed to let him live if he acted as their guard. Likewise, he's not very immense.'

'What weapons does he have?' I ask. 'And the food's just out in the open?' I say. She nods at us.

'Something's not quite right about that whole setup.'

'I know. Likewise, I couldn't tell what exactly,' says Leah. 'Elody, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?'

'Burn it... Dump it in the lake. Soak it in fuel.' I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would my sisters. 'Eat it!' She giggles.

'Don't worry, I'll think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.'

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I come to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forages in the meadows in a community where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, 'Music.'

I have a Gibson with a Bigsby on it... I said- 'Music?' I say. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. 'You have a lot of time for that?'

'We sing at home. At work, too. That's why I love your pin,' she says, pointing to the blue jay that I've again forgotten about.

'Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,' she says.

'What do you mean?' I say.

'I'm usually up highest, so I'm the first to see the flag that signals quitting time.

There's a special little song I do,' says Leah. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. 'And the blue jays spread it around the groves. That's how everyone knows to knock off,' she continues. 'They can be dangerous though if you get too nearby their nests. Likewise, you can't blame them for that.' I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. 'Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.'

'Oh, no,' says Leah, closing my fingers back over the pin. 'I like to see it on you. That's how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.' She pulls a necklace woven out of some kind of grass from her shirt. On it, hangs a roughly carved wooden star. Or maybe it's a flower. 'It's a good luck charm.'

'Well, it's worked so far,' I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. 'Maybe you should just stick with that.'

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she'll have time for on her own. We decide to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Leah's well stocked- with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag, in case it's not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

'What about you? Won't you be cold?' She asks.

'Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake,' I say. 'You know, stealing isn't illegal here,' I say with a grin.

At the last minute, permitted decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. 'It might not work. Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you'll know I'm okay, only I can't get back right away.' 'Haven't you seen them? They've got nests ubiquitously,' she says. I have to admit I haven't seen. 'Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I'll see you for dinner,' I say. 'Are there many

blue jays here?' I ask. Without prior notice, Permitted throws her arms around me. I only hesitate a moment before I hug her back. 'You be careful,' she says to me.

'You, too,' I say. I turn and head back to the stream, feeling somehow worried. About Permitted being killed, about Permitted not being killed and the two of us being left for last, about leaving Permitted alone, about leaving my sister alone back home. No, my sister has my mother and Permitted and a baker who has promised she won't go hungry. Permitted has only me.

Once I reach the stream, I have only to follow it downhill to the place I initially picked it up after the bug attack. The cannon that fired early this morning, did that signify his death? If so, how did he die? At the hand of a Career? And was that in revenge for letting me live? I personally struggle again to remember that moment over Annha body, when he burst through the trees. Likewise, just the fact that he was sparkling leads me to doubt everything that happened. I have to be cautious as I move along the water though because I find my thoughts preoccupied with unanswered questions, most of which concern my boy.

Remember, I tell myself. You're the hunter now, not them. I get a firmer grasp on my bow and go on. I make it to the copse Permitted has told me about and again have to admire her cleverness. It's right at the edge of the wood, Likewise, the bushy foliage is so thick down low I can easily observe the Career camp without being spotted. Between us lies the flat expanse where the Tournament began. When I reach the tree with the abandoned nest at the foot, I pause a moment, to gather my courage.

Permitted has given specific instructions on how to reach the best spying place near the lake from this point.

I must have been moving very slowly yesterday because I reach the shallow stretch where I took my bath in just a few hours. I stop to replenish my water and add a layer of mud to my backpack. It seems bent on reverting to orange no matter how many times I cover it.

My proximity to the Careers' camp sharpens my senses, and the closer I get to them, the more guarded I am, pausing frequently to listen for unnatural sounds, an arrow already fitted into the string of my bow. I don't see any others,

Likewise, I do notice some of the things Permitted has mentioned. Patches of the sweet berries. A bush with the leaves that healed my stings. Clusters of bug nests in the vicinity of the tree I was trapped in. And here and there, the black-and-white flash of a blue jay wing in the branches high over my head.

There are four-try Likewise. The boy from Community 1, Permitted and the girl from Community 2, and a scrawny, ashen-skinned boy who must be from Community 3. He made almost no impression on me at all during our time in the Capitol. I can remember almost nothing about him, not his costume, not his training score, not his interview.

Even now, as he sits there fiddling with some kind of plastic box, he's easily ignored in the presence of his large and domineering companions. Likewise, he must be of some value or they wouldn't have bothered to let him live. Still, seeing him only adds to my sense of unease over why the Careers would possibly leave him as a guard, why they have allowed him to live at all.

All four it seems to still be recuperating from the ant's attack. Even from here, I can see the large swollen lumps

on their bodies. They must not have had the sense to remove the stingers, or if they did, not known about the leaves that healed them. Apparently, whatever medicines they found in the Cornucopia have been ineffective.

Some other factor is at play here, and I'd better stay put until I figure out what it is. My guess is the pyramid is booby-trapped in some manner. I think of concealed pits, descending nets, a thread that when broken sends a poisonous dart into your heart.

Really, the possibilities are endless.

Most of the supplies, held in crates, burlap sacks, and plastic bins, are piled neatly in a pyramid in what seems a questionable distance from the camp. Others are sprinkled around the perimeter 50 miles away from this point I said- no way of getting there it's not worth it, almost impersonating the layout of supplies around the large amount at the onset of the tournament. All part of the tournament makes it stupid hard- to live... A canopy of netting that, aside from discouraging birds, seems to be useless shelters the goods itself.

The whole setup is completely perplexing. The distance, the netting, and the presence of the boy from Community 3. One thing's for sure, destroying those supplies is not going to be as simple as it looks. My arm's pretty good, I might be able to chuck some rocks in there and set off what? Maybe one mine? That could start a chain reaction. Or could it? Would the boy from Community 3 have placed the mines in such a way that a single mine would not disturb the others?

Thereby protecting the supplies Likewise, ensuring the death of the invader. Even if I only blew up one mine, I'd draw the Careers back down on me for sure. And anyway, what am I thinking? There's that net, clearly strung to deflect any such attack. Besides, what I'd really need is to throw about thirty rocks in there at once, setting off a big chain reaction, demolishing the whole lot.

There is a solution to this, I know there is if I can only focus hard enough. I stare at the pyramid, the bins, the crates, too heavy to topple over with an arrow. Maybe one contains cooking oil, and the burning arrow idea is reviving when I realize I could end up losing all twelve of my arrows and not get a direct hit on an oil bin since I'd just be guessing. I'm

genuinely thinking of trying to recreate Fox-face's trip up to the pyramid in hopes of finding a new means of destruction when my eyes light on the burlap bag of apples. I could sever the rope in one shot, didn't I do as much in the Training Center? It's a big bag, Likewise, it still might only be good for one explosion. If only I could free the apples themselves.

While I am mulling over my options, I hear Permitted shout out. He's pointing up to the woods, far beyond me, and without turning I know that Permitted must have set the first campfire. We'd made sure to gather enough green wood to make the smoke noticeable. The Careers begin to arm themselves at once.

An argument breaks out. It's loud enough for me to hear that it concerns whether or not the boy from Community 3 should stay or accompany them.

'He's coming. We need him in the woods, and his job's done here anyway. No one can touch those supplies,' says Leah.

'What about Lover Boy?' says the boy from Community 1.

'I keep telling you, forget about him. I know where I cut him. It's a miracle he hasn't bled to death yet. At any rate, he's in no shape to raid us,' says Leah.

So, my boy is out there in the woods, wounded badly. Likewise, I am still in the dark about what motivated him to betray the Careers.

'Quickly,' says Leah. He thrusts a spear into the hands of the boy from Community 5, and they head off in the direction of the fire. The last thing- I hear as they enter the woods is Permitted saying, 'When we find her, I kill her in my own way, and no one interferes.'

Somehow- I don't think he's talking about Leah. She didn't drop a nest of bugs on him. I stay put for a half an hour or so, trying to figure out what to do about the supplies. The one advantage I have with the bow and arrow is distance and gunfire.

There's no alternative to going for the goods. I'm going to have to get in close and see if I can't discover what exactly protects the supplies. In fact, I'm just about to reveal myself when a movement catches my eye. Several hundred

yards to my left, I see someone emerge from the woods. For a second, I think it's Leah, Likewise, then I recognize the boy and I blow his head off his shoulders-and the brains splatter all over the tree he was next, she's the one we couldn't remember this morning- creeping out onto the plain. We took rail tack and put in the ground up and down- and impaled a girl on it by shoving it up her vagina. Look she looks like a savior Permitted said. That not funny I said- your faith is not mine.

When she decides it's safe, she runs for the pyramid, with quick, small steps. Just before she reaches the circle of supplies that have been littered around the pyramid, she stops, searches the ground, and carefully places her feet on a spot. Then she begins to approach the pyramid with strange little hops, sometimes landing on one foot, teetering slightly, sometimes risking a few steps. At one point, she launches up in the air, over a small barrel and lands poised on her tiptoes.

I glance back up at the woods. The smoke from Leah's second fire is wafting toward the sky. By now, the Careers have probably begun to suspect some sort of trick.

Time is running out.

Likewise, she overshot slightly, and her momentum throws her forward. I hear her give a sharp squeal as her hands hit the ground, Likewise, nothing happens. In a moment, she's regained her feet and continues until she has reached the bulk of the supplies.

So, I'm right about the booby trap, Likewise, it's clearly more complex than I had imagined. I was right about the girl, too. How wily is she to have discovered this path into the food and to be able to replicate it so neatly? She fills her pack, taking a few items from a variety of containers, crackers from a crate, a handful of apples from a burlap sack that hangs suspended from a rope off the side of a bin. Likewise, only a handful from each, not enough to tip off that the food is missing. Not enough to cause suspicion. And then she's doing her odd little dance back out of the circle and scampering into the woods again, safe and sound.

I realize I'm grinding my teeth in frustration. She has confirmed what I'd already guessed. Likewise, what sort of trap have they laid that requires such deftness? Has so many trigger points? Why did she squeal so as her hands made contact with the earth? You'd have thought. And slowly it

begins to dawn on me. You'd have thought the very ground was going to explode.

'It's mined,' I whisper. That explains everything.

The Careers' willingness to leave their supplies, her reaction, the involvement of the boy from Community 3, where they have the factories, where they make televisions and automobiles and explosives. Likewise, where did he get them? In the supplies? That's not the sort of weapon the Tournament makers usually provide, given that they like to see the drawn blood personally.

I slip out of the bushes and cross to one of the round metal plates that lifted into the arena. The ground around it has been dug up and patted back down.

The landmines were disabled after the sixty seconds we stood on the plates, Likewise, the boy from Community 3 must have managed to reactivate them. I've never seen anyone in the tournament do that to yah. I bet it came as a shock even to the star makers.

Well, hurray for the boy from

Community 3 for putting one over on them,
Likewise, what am I supposed to do now? Obviously, I can't go
strolling into that mess without blowing myself sky-high. As for
sending in a burning arrow, that's more laughable than ever.
The mines are set off by pressure. It doesn't have to be a lot,
either. One year, a girl dropped her token, a small wooden ball,
while she was at her plate, and they literally had to scrape bits
of her off the ground.

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You saved me with those bugs. You're smart
enough to still be alive. And I can't seem to shake you anyway,' I
say. She blinks at me, trying to decide.

'You hungry?'

I can see her swallow hard, her eye flickering to the
meat. 'Come on then, I've had two kills today.' tentatively steps
out into the open. 'I can fix your stings.' 'Can you?' I ask. 'How?'
He digs in the pack she carries and pulls out a handful of leaves.
I'm almost certain they're the ones my mother uses. 'Where'd
you find those?' 'Just around. We all carry them when we work

in the orchards. They left a lot of nests there,' says my boy said.
'There is a lot here, too.'

'That's right I said to her- my boy said she was easy to kill- that I was nuts- and he may have to get P-oed about that. You're Area 11. Agriculture,' I say. 'Orchards, huh? That must be how you can fly around the trees like you've got wings.'
Permitted smiles. I've landed on one of the few things she'll admit pride in. 'Well, come on, then. Fix me up.' I said she not going to hurt you... or me- see need us- more than we need here.

I plunk down by the fire and roll up my pant leg to reveal the sting on my knee. To my surprise, permitted places the handful of leaves into her mouth and begins to chew them. My mother would use other methods, Likewise, it's not like we have a lot of options. After a minute or so, Permitted presses a gloppy green wad of chewed leaves and spit on my knee.

'Oh.' The sound comes out of my mouth before I can stop it. It's as if the leaves are actually leaching the pain right out of the sting. She gives a giggle. 'Okay,' she says, and holds out her hand. We shake- not to kill each other. 'It's a deal.'

Of course, this kind of deal can only be temporary, Likewise, neither of us mentions that.

'Oh,' says Permitted with a sigh. 'I've never had a whole leg to myself before.' I'll bet she hasn't had sex yet. I'll bet meat hardly ever comes her way. 'Take the other,' I say. 'Really?' she asks- she over here yes, I have! Your seven years old- he looks weirdly- like yeah right.

'Bugs Oh, yes, we have them back home. I've been eating them for days,' she says, popping a handful in her mouth. I tentatively bite into one, and it's as good as blackberries- that we had too.

'How did you get those?' she asks.

'In my pack. They've been useless so far. They don't block the sun and they make it harder to see,' I say with a shrug.

'Where do you sleep?' I ask her. 'In the trees?' She nods. 'In just your jacket- or what?' That my blanket my jacket- and I sleep were I can find- and naked- if you must know... She holds up her extra pair of socks and said I use them as pads. Try it- it works...

We pick a fork high in a tree and settle in for the night just as the anthem begins to play. There were no deaths today. I think of how cold the nights have been. 'You can share my sleeping bag if you want. We'll both easily fit.' Her face lights up. I can tell this is more than she dared hope for.

~*~

I don't answer the cam flying around me. If, in fact, my boy did save me, I'm in his debt again. And this can't be paid back. 'If he did, it was all probably just part of his act. You know, to make people think he's in love with me. 'The sky goes dark, 'let's try out these night spectacles you have.' I pull out the glasses and slip them on. I can see everything from the leaves on the trees to a skunk strolling through the bushes a good fifty feet away. I could kill it from here if I had a mind to. I could kill anyone. We shot one for 300 years away. With her dad custom gun. One was stolen from me she said. 'I wonder who else got a pair of these, a thong is what she held up,' I say. I can run in these can you- I don't wear those for the point. How about a bra? Not yet- me either... my boy sniggers... saying girl chat.

Make love to me!

...And he did!

Step 1- Put her in 'The Mood'

What is said only online- and what I do for her- they have all this for us to know: Before you have sex, you have to put you're a woman in the mood? This involves setting up the right kind of environment which will enhance her pleasure. To put her in the mood, you should darken the room, light some candles and put on good music. Your focus should be to create an atmosphere which emphasizes sensuality.

Step 2- Use foreplay- Foreplay is one of the most important things to learn about how to make love to a woman. Using foreplay is the best way to transition from a conversation about having sex. Typically, foreplay involves kissing, 'heavy petting' and sensual massages.

The rule of thumb is to really focus on her pleasure and start building up the intensity.

Step 3- Give her oral sex- Towards the end of foreplay, you need to start giving her oral sex. Start slowly and use your tongue and fingers. Since women like different things

in oral sex, try to experiment with various oral sex techniques. When you see her get really excited, continue to do whatever is getting her into it.

Step 4- Tease her- Once you've brought her to the pinnacle of pleasure from oral sex, you should start to have sex. Now, most guys will just start having sex without any thought. This is a mistake! Instead of going right for sex, you should start to tease her. What you should do is go slowly and start to have sex, then stop. Keep doing this till she goes crazy and practically pulls you inside her.

Step 5- Start slowly and build up intensity now once you've had sex, it's important to change paces (and positions.) Again- your focus is to concentrate on her pleasure and make sure she's really enjoying herself.

What really works is to build up speed then pull back to a slow and sensual pace. Keep doing this pattern till both of you can't take it anymore. Knowing how to make love to a woman is an important skill to have.

If you can follow the five-step process I described in this article, you'll instantly become the best lover she's ever

had. Now all you have to do is to find a woman to practice your new skills! The teen guidelines for sex in the Star tournament, for love- and real compels- if it's hock-up or tack by fours sex just fuck! There no laws stopping them from taking you, your ass is own by them of the tournament, and the odds.

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Sam! He could send me water! Yet that makes you weak- and you go down in your likeness and points. Press and news, have it delivered to me in a silvery descend in minutes- I know this. I know I must have sponsors, at least one or two who could afford a pint of liquid for me. Yes, it's pricey, Likewise, these people, they're made of money. Besides, they'll be betting on me as well. Perhaps Sam- doesn't realize how deep my need is. You can get all this if you have the courage.

I say in a voice as loud as I dare. 'Water.' I wait, hopefully, for a parachute to descend from the sky. Likewise, nothing is forthcoming.

Something is wrong. Am I deluded about having sponsors? Or has my boy's conduct made them all hang back? No, I don't believe it. There's someone out there who wants to

buy me water only; Sam- is declining to let it go through. As my counselor, he gets to regulator the flow of gifts from the guarantors. I know he hates me.

He's made that clear enough, I have miss-judged Sam- he has no intention of helping me at all.

Almost nothing stayed in my stomach yesterday, and I'm already starting to feel the effects of famine.

Below me, I can see the Career pack and my boy asleep on the ground. By her position, leaning up against the trunk of the tree, I'd guess Glimmer was supposed to be on guard, Likewise, fatigue overcame her.

My eyes squint as they try to penetrate the tree next to me, Likewise, I can't make out Leah. Since she tipped me off, it only seems fair to warn her. Besides, if I'm going to die today, it's Permitted I want to win. Even if it means a little extra food for my family, the idea of my boy being crowned victor is unbearable.

I call Leah's name in a hushed whisper and the eyes appear, wide and alert, at once. She points up to the nest again.

I hold up my knife and make a sawing motion. She nods and disappears.

There's a rustling in a nearby tree. Then the same noise again a bit farther off. I realize she's leaping from tree to tree. It's all I can do not to laugh out loud. Is this what she showed the Tournament makers? I imagine her flying around the training equipment never touching the floor. She should have gotten at least a seven.

Rosy streaks are breaking through in the east. I can't afford to wait any longer. Compared to the agony of last night's climb, this one is a cinch. At the tree limb that holds the nest, I position the knife in the groove and I'm about to draw the teeth across the wood when I see something moving. There, on the nest. The bright gold gleam of a maestro's idly making its way across the papery leaden exterior.

No inquiry, it's acting a little subdued, Likewise, the wasp is up and moving and that means the others will be out soon as well. Sweat breaks out on the palms of my hands, beading up through the ointment, and I do my best to pat them dry on my shirt- yes I topless no you like that I asked to the

camera that was flying like a little blue jay- by me un-maned- getting all the goods. If I don't get through this branch in a matter of seconds, the entire swarm could emerge and attack me.

There's no sense in putting it off. I take a deep breath, grip the knife handle and

bear down as hard as I can. Back, forth, back, forth! The red ants begin to bit and I hear them coming out of the holes. Back, forth, back, forth they make their way with me!

A stabbing pain shoots through my knee and I know one has found me and the others will be honing in. Back, forth, back, forth. And just as the knife cuts through, I shove the end of the branch as far away from me as I can. It crashes down through the lower branches, snagging temporarily on a few. Likewise, then twisting free until it smashes with a thud on the ground.

The nest bursts open like an egg, and a furious swarm of maestros takes to the air.

I feel a second sting on the cheek, a third on my neck, and their venom almost immediately makes me woozy. I cling to the tree with one arm while I rip the barbed stingers out of my flesh. Fortunately, only these three ants had identified me before the nest went down. Red can kill if you get over 100 bits- black- can make you blow chunks, and yellow and black- dizzy and pass out- The rest of the insects have targeted their enemies on the ground and in the air. Your only friend here are the bluebirds that sing, and some of the others, there is only one that can kill, and the all black one- it picks and stocks known as the Amzal bird you as you pass it.

This is all right, I think. This is not so bad here. The air is less hot, signifying evening's approach. There's a slight, sweet scent that reminds me of lilies. My fingers stroke the smooth ground, sliding easily across the top. This is an okay place to die, I think.

My fingertips make small swirling patterns down there- like they do on the sandy, slippery earth. I love mud like I like liking my fingers after the height of my moment on the screen- I think it feels so good.

How many times 10 or more in one day- just the same- I've tracked tournament with the help of its soft, readable surface. Good for bee wounds- I hate red ants also up my butt cheeks- good there bigger and redder than my nipples, too. Muddy. Sludge. Muck! My eyes fly open and I dig my fingers into the earth. It is mud! My nose lifts in the air. And those are lilies! Pond lilies! It's all I can do not to plunge my face into the water and gulp down as much as I can hold. Likewise, I have just enough sense left to abstain. With trembling hands, I get out my flask and fill it with water.

I crawl now, through the mud, dragging myself toward the scent. Five yards from where I fell, I crawl through a tangle of plants into a pond. I take one swallow and make myself wait. Then another. Over the next couple of hours, I drink the entire half gallon or so. Then a second. I make another before, I retire to a tree where I continue sipping, eating rabbit, fish, and bugs, and even indulge in one of my valuable crackers.

Floating on the top, creamy flowers in bloom, are my beautiful lilies, like in an impressionistic painting I add what I remember to be the right number of drops of iodine for

purifying it. Slowly, easy now, I tell myself. Sucking the blood out- hard.

By the time the anthem plays, I feel remarkably better. The half an hour of waiting is agony, Likewise, I do it. At least, I think it's a half an hour, equally it's certainly as long as I can view.

There are no faces tonight, no callouts today or any died. Tomorrow I'll stay here, resting, camouflaging my backpack with mud, catching some of those little fish I saw as I sipped, and digging up the roots of the pond lilies to make a nice meal. I snuggle down in my sleeping bag, hanging on to my water bottle for dear life, which, of course, it is.

This was no campfires gone out of control, no accidental occurrence. The flames that bear down on me have an unnatural height, a uniformity that marks them as human-made, machine-made, star maker- made. Things have been too quiet today. No deaths, perhaps no fights at all.

The audience in the Capitol will be getting bored, claiming that these Tournament are verging on tediousness. This is the one thing the Tournament must not do.

It's not hard to follow the Tournament maker's enthusiasm. There is the career pack, and then there are the rest of us, perhaps spread far, and thin cross-ways there in the arena.

This fire is designed to flush us out, to drive us together. It may not be the most original device I've seen, the same it's very, right and so-o actual.

I obstacle over a burning log. Not high enough... The tail end of my jacket catches on fire, and I have to stop to rip it away from my body and stamp out the flames as the start to lick my body- and I now topless. Running half-naked in the woods with him running not too far away- downing the same- Likewise, I dare leave the jacket even if it has all my metals, I cannot I have to get them off- fast it's all I have to show what I did- I have 50 kills on their... now- more than any other girl here- burnt and ablaze some, I dump with little whiter I have on it- I knew that jackman's more than my life with having H2O.

My hair- looks cool this way I said- thinking about it. I take the risk of shoving it in my sleeping bag saggy, hoping the lack of air will suppress, what I haven't smothered. This is all

I have, what I carry on my back, and it's little an adequate amount to survive with... I no... I don't really seem to have much choice. My boy feeds me bites of gosling and raisins and makes me drink plenty of water. He rubs some warmth back into my feet and wraps them in his jacket before tucking the sleeping bag back up around my chin.

'Your boots and socks are still damp and the weather's not helping much,' he says. There's a clap of thunder, and I see lightning electrify the sky through an opening in the rocks. Rain drips through several holes in the ceiling, Likewise, my boy has built a sort of canopy over my head an upper body by wedging the square of plastic into the rock above me.

'I wonder what brought on this storm? I mean, who's the target?' says my boy.

' Permitted and Thresh,' I say without thinking.
'Fox-face will be in her den somewhere, and Clove. she cut me and then.

' My voice trails off.

'I know Clove's dead. I saw it in the sky last night,'
he says. 'Did you kill her?'

'No. Thresh broke her skull with a rock,' I say.

'Lucky he didn't catch you, too,' says my boy.

The memory of the feast returns full force and I feel sick. 'He did. Likewise, he let me go.' Then, of course, I have to tell him. About things, I've kept to myself because he was too sick to ask and I wasn't ready to relive anyway. Like the explosion and my ear and Leah's dying and the boy from Community 1 and the bread. All of which leads to what happened with Thresh and how he was paying off a debt of sorts.

'He let you go because he didn't want to owe you anything?' Asks My boy in disbelief.

'Yes. I don't expect you to understand it. You've always had enough. Likewise, if you'd lived in the Seam, I wouldn't have to explain,' I say.

'And don't try. Obviously, I'm too dim to get it.'

'It's like the bread. How I never seem to get over owing you for that,' I say.

'The bread? What? From when we were kids?' he says. 'I think we can let that go. I mean, you just brought me back from the dead.'

' Likewise, you didn't know me. We had never even spoken. Besides, it's the first gift that's always the hardest to pay back. I wouldn't even have been here to do it if you hadn't helped me then,' I say. 'Why did you, anyway?'

'Why? You know why,' my boy says. I give my head a slight, painful shake. 'Sam- said you would take a lot of convincing.'

'Sam-?' I ask. 'What's he got to do with it?'

'Nothing,' My boy says. 'So, Permitted and Thresh, huh? I guess it's too much to hope that they'll simultaneously destroy each other?'

Likewise, the thought only upsets me. 'I think we would like Thresh. I think he'd be our friend back in Community Twelve,' I say.

'Then let's hope Permitted kills him, so we don't have to,' says My boy grimly.

I don't want Permitted to kill Thresh at all. I don't want anyone else to die. Likewise, this is absolutely not the kind of thing that victors go around saying in the arena. Despite my best efforts, I can feel tears starting to pool in my eyes.

My boy looks at me with concern.

'What is it? Are you in a lot of pain?'

I give him another answer because it is equally Permitted Likewise, can be taken as a brief moment of weakness instead of a terminal one. 'I want to go home, my boy,' I said plaintively, like a small child.

'You will. I promise,' he says, and bends over to give me a kiss.

'I want to go home now,' I say.

'Tell you what. You go back to sleep and dream of home. And you'll be there for real before you know it,' lie says.
'Okay?'

'Okay,' I whisper. 'Wake me if you need me to keep watch.'

'I'm good and rested, thanks to you and Sam-. Besides, who knows how long this will last?' He says.

What does he mean? The storm? The brief respite I-I brings us? The Tournament themselves? I don't know, Likewise, I'm ion sad and tried to ask.

It's evening when my boy wakes me again. The rain has turned to a downpour, sending streams of water through our ceiling where earlier there had been only dripping. My boy has placed the broth pot under the worst one and repositioned the plastic to deflect most of it from me. I feel a bit better, able to sit up without getting too dizzy, and I'm absolutely famished. So is my boy. It's clear he's been waiting for me to wake up to eat and is eager to get started.

There's not much left. Two pieces of a gosling, a small mishmash of roots, and a handful of dried fruit.

'Should we try and ration it?' My boy asks.

'No, let's just finish it. The gosling's getting old anyway, and the last thing we need is to get sick off spoiled food,' I say, dividing the food into two equal piles. We try and eat slowly, Likewise, we're both so hungry were done in a couple of minutes.

My stomach is in no way satisfied. 'Tomorrow's a hunting day,' I say. 'I'll kill and you cook,' I say.

'And you can always gather.' 'I won't be much help with that,' My boy says. 'I've never hunted before.' 'I wish there was some sort of bread bush out there,' says my boy.

'The bread they sent me from Region 11 was still warm,' I say with a sigh. 'Here, chew these.' I hand him a couple of mint leaves and pop a few in my own mouth.

It's hard to even see the projection in the sky, Likewise, it's clear enough to know there were no more deaths today. So, permitted and Thresh haven't had it out yet.

I brace myself for the agony that's sure to follow. Likewise, as I feel the tip open the first cut at my lip, some great form yanks Clove from my body and then she's screaming. I'm

too stunned at first, too unable to process what has happened.
Has my boy somehow come to my rescue? Have the
Tournament makers sent in some wild animal to add to the fun?
Has a hovercraft inexplicably plucked her into the air?

Likewise, when I push myself up on my numb arms,
I see it's none of the above. Clove is dangling a foot off the
ground, imprisoned in Thresh's arms. I let out a gasp, seeing him
like that, towering over me, holding Clove like a rag doll. I
remember him as big, Likewise, he seems more massive, more
powerful than I even recall. If anything, he seems to have
gained weight in the arena. He flips Clove around and flings her
onto the ground.

When he shouts, I jump, never having heard him
speak above a mutter. 'What'd you do to that little girl? You kill
her.'

Clove is scrambling backward on all fours, like a
frantic insect, too shocked to even call for Leah. 'No! No, it
wasn't me!'

Dinah- 'You said her name. I heard you. You kill
her?' and I did- Another thought brings a fresh wave of rage to

his features. 'You cut her up like you were going to cut up this girl here?'

Dinah brings the rock down hard against Clove's temple. It's not bleeding, Likewise, I can see the dent in her skull and I know that she's a goner. There's still life in her now though, in the rapid rise and fall of her chest, the low moan escaping her lips.

When Thresh whirls around on me, the rock raised, I know it's no good to run. And my bow is empty, the last loaded arrow having gone in Clove's direction. I'm trapped in the glare of his strange golden-brown eyes. 'What'd she mean? About Permitted being your ally?'

'And you killed her?' he demands me to say if I think he could. I try to run...

'Yes. I killed him. And buried her in flowers,' I say.

'And I sang her to sleep.'

Tears spring in my eyes. The tension, the fight goes out of me at the memory. And I'm overwhelmed by Leah and

the pain in my head, and my fear of Thresh, and the moaning of the dying girl a few feet away.

'To sleep?' Thresh says gruffly.

'To death. I sang until she died,' I say. 'Your district. they sent me bread.' My hand reaches up Likewise, not for an arrow that I know I'll never reach. Just to wipe my nose.

Conflicting emotions cross Thresh's face. He lowers the rock and points at me, almost accusingly. 'Just this one time, I let you go. For the little girl. You and me, we're even then. No more owed. You understand?'

I nod because I do understand. About owing. About hating it. I understand that if Thresh wins, he'll have to go back and face a community that has already broken all the rules to thank me, and he is breaking the rules to thank me, too. And I understand that, for the moment, Thresh is not going to smash in my skull.

'Clove!' his voice is much nearer now. I can tell by the pain in it that he sees her on the ground.

'You better run now, Girl,' says the boy that has gotten as many as me.

I don't need to be told twice. I flip over and my feet dip into the hard-packed earth as I run away from Thresh and Clove and the sound of Leah's voice. Only when I reach the woods do I turn back for an instant. Thresh and both large backpacks are vanishing over the edge of the plain into the area I've never seen. Permitted kneels beside Clove, spear in hand, begging her to stay with him. In a moment, he will realize it's futile, she can't be saved. I crash into the trees, repeatedly wiping away the blood that's pouring into my eye, fleeing like the wild, wounded creature I am. After a few minutes, I hear the cannon and I know that Clove has died, that Permitted will be on one of our trails. Either Thrash's or mine. I'm seized with terror, weak from my head wound, shaking. I load an arrow, Likewise, permitted can throw that spear almost as far as I can shoot.

Only one thing calms me down. Thresh has Leah's backpack containing the thing he needs desperately. If I had to bet, permitted headed out after Thresh, not me. Still, I don't slow down when I reach the water. I plunge right in, boots still

on, and flounder downstream. I pull off Leah's socks that I've been using for gloves and press them into my forehead, trying to staunch the flow of blood, Likewise, they're soaked in minutes.

'Where did Thresh go? I mean, what's on the far side of the circle?' I ask my boy.

'A field. As far as you can see it's full of grasses as high as my shoulders. I don't know, maybe some of them are grain.

There are patches of different colors.

Likewise, there are no paths,' says my boy.

'I bet some of them are grain. I bet Thresh knows which ones, too,' I say. 'Did you go in there?'

'No. Nobody really wanted to track Thresh down in that grass. It has a sinister feeling to it. Every time I look at that field, all I can think of are hidden things. Snakes, and rabid animals, and quicksand,' My boy says. 'There could be anything in there.'

I do sleep, on the train back- Likewise, in the morning I'm extra-cautious, thinking that while the Careers might hesitate to attack me in a tree, they're completely capable of setting an ambush for me. I make sure to fully prepare myself for the day eating a big breakfast, securing my pack, readying my weapons before I descend. Likewise, all seems peaceful and undisturbed on the ground. I tossed most of it- he in my mind now only. I don't even have a photo of him... they would not let me keep one- for he was a week.

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'My boy, you were supposed to wake me after a couple of hours,' I say.

'For what? Nothing's going on here,' he says.

'Besides I like watching you sleep. You don't scowl.

Improves your looks a lot.'

This, of course, brings on a scowl that makes him grin. That's when I notice how dry his lips are. I test his cheek. Hot as a coal stove. He claims he's been drinking, Likewise, the containers still feel full to me. I give him more fever pills and

stand over him while he drinks first one, then the second quart of water. Then I tend to his minor wounds, the burns, the stings, which are showing improvement. I steel myself and unwrap the leg.

'Burn medicine,' I say almost sheepishly. 'Oh, and some bread.'

'I always knew you were his favorite,' says my boy.

'Please, he can't stand being in the same room with me,' I say.

'Because you're just alike,' mutters My boy. I ignore it though because this really isn't the time for me to be insulting Sam-, which is my first impulse.

I let My boy doze off while his clothes dry out, Likewise, by late afternoon, I don't dare wait any longer.

I gently shake his shoulder.

'My boy, we've got to go now.' 'Go?' He seems confused. 'Go where?' 'Away from here. Downstream maybe. Somewhere we can hide you until you're stronger,' I say. I help

him dress, leaving his feet bare so we can walk in the water, and pull him upright. His face drains of color the moment he puts weight on his leg. 'Come on. You can do this.'

Likewise, he can't. Not for long anyway. We make it about fifty yards downstream, with him propped up by my shoulder and I can tell he's going to black out. I sit him on the bank, push his head between his knees, and pat his back awkwardly as I survey the area. Of course, I'd love to get him up in a tree, Likewise, that's not going to happen. It could be worse though. Some of the rocks form small cave-like structures. I set my sights on one about twenty yards above the stream.

When my body's ability to stand, I half-guide, half-carry him up to the cave. Really, I'd like to look around for a better place, Likewise, this one will have to do because my ally is shot. Paperwhite, panting, and, even though it's only just cooling off, he's shivering.

I cover the floor of the cave with a layer of pine needles, unroll my sleeping bag, and tuck him into it. I get a couple of pills and some water into him when he's not noticing, Likewise, he refuses to eat even the fruit. Then he just lies

there, his eyes trained on my face as I build a sort of blind out of vines to conceal the mouth of the cave. The result is unsatisfactory. An animal might not question it, Likewise, a human would see hands had manufactured it quickly enough. I tear it down in frustration.

'Elody,' he says. I go over to him and brush the hair back from his eyes. 'Thanks for finding me.'

'You would have found me if you could,' I say. His forehead's burning up. Like the medicines having no effect at all. Suddenly, out of nowhere, I'm scared he's going to die.

'Yes. Look, if I don't make it back, 'he begins.

'Don't talk like that. I didn't drain all that pus for nothing,' I say.

'I know. Likewise, just in case I don't- 'he tries to continue.

'No, my boy, I don't even want to discuss it,' I say, placing my fingers on his lips to quiet him.

' Likewise, I- ' he insists.

Impulsively, I lean forward and kiss him, stopping his words. This is probably overdue anyway since he's right, we are supposed to be madly in love. It's the first time I've ever kissed a boy, which should make some sort of impression I guess, Likewise, all I can register is how unnaturally hot his lips are from the fever. I break away and pull the edge of the sleeping bag up around him.

'You're not going to die. I forbid it. All right?'

'All right,' he whispers.

I step out in the cool evening air just as the parachute floats down from the sky. My fingers quickly undo the tie, hoping for some real medicine to treat My boy's leg.

Instead, I find a pot of hot broth.

Sam- couldn't be sending me a clearer message. One kiss equals one pot of broth. I can almost hear his snarl. 'You're supposed to be in love, sweetheart. The boy's death. Give me something I can work with!'

~*~

And he's right. If I want to keep My boy alive, I've got to give the audience something more to care about. Star-crossed lovers desperate to get home together. Two hearts beating as one. Romance.

Never having been in love, this is going to be a real trick. I think of my parents. The way my father never failed to bring her gifts from the woods. The way my mother's face would light up at the sound of his boots at the door. The way she almost stopped living when he died.

'My boy!' I say, trying for the special tone that my mother used only with my father. He's dozed off again, Likewise, I kiss him awake, which seems to startle him. Then he smiles as if he'd be happy to lie there gazing at me forever. He's great at this stuff.

~*~

I hold up the pot. 'My boy, look what Sam- has sent you.'

My heart drops into my stomach. It's worse, much worse. There's no more pus in evidence, Likewise, the swelling

has increased and the tight shiny skin is inflamed. Then I see the red streaks starting to crawl up his leg. Blood poisoning. Unchecked, it will kill him for sure. My chewed-up leaves and ointment won't make a dent in it. We'll need strong antiinfection drugs from the Capitol. I can't imagine the cost of such potent medicine. If Sam- pooled every donation from every sponsor, would he have enough? I doubt it. Gifts go up in price the longer the Tournament continue. What buys a full meal on day one buys a cracker on day twelve. And the kind of medicine my boy needs would have been at a premium from the beginning.

'Well, there's more swelling, Likewise, the pus is gone,' I say in an unsteady voice.

'I know what blood poisoning is, Elody,' says my boy. 'Even if my mother isn't a healer.' 'You're just going to have to outlast the others, my boy. They'll cure it back at the Capitol when we win,' I say. 'Yes, that's a good plan,' he says. Likewise, I feel this is mostly for my benefit. 'You have to eat. Keep your strength up. I'm going to make you soup,' I say. 'Don't light a fire,' he says. 'It's not worth it.'

~*~

'We'll see,' I say. As I take the pot down to the stream, I'm struck by how brutally hot it is. I swear the Tournament makers are progressively ratcheting up the temperature in the daytime and sending it plummeting at night. The heat of the sunbaked stones by the stream gives me an idea though. Maybe I won't need to light a fire.

I settle down on a big flat rock halfway between the stream and the cave. After purifying half a pot of water, I place it

in direct sunlight and add several egg-size hot stones to the water. I'm the first to admit I'm not much of a cook. Likewise, since soup mainly involves tossing everything in a pot and waiting, it's one of my better dishes. I mince gosling until it's practically mush and mash some of Leah's roots. Fortunately, they've both been roasted already so they mostly need to be heated up. Already, between the sunlight and the rocks, the water's warm. I put in the meat and roots, swap in fresh rocks, and go find something green to spice it up a little. Before long, I discover a tuft of chives growing at the base of

some rocks. Perfect. I chop them very fine and add them to the pot, switch out the rocks again, put on the lid, and let the whole thing stew. 'Did I ever tell you about how I got my sister's goat?'

I ask. My boy shakes his head and looks at me expectantly. So, I begin. Likewise, carefully. Because my words are going out all over them. And while people have no doubt put two and two together that I hunt illegally, I don't want to hurt Permitted or Sue or the others or even the Peacekeepers back home who are my customers by publicly announcing they'd to break the law, too.

Here's the real story of how I got the money for my sister's goat, Lady. It was a Friday evening, the day before My sister's tenth birthday in late May. As soon as school ended, Permitted and I hit the woods because I wanted to get enough to trade for a present for my sister. Maybe some new cloth for a dress or a hairbrush. Our snares had done well enough and the woods were flush with greens, Likewise, this was really no more than our average Friday-night haul. I was disappointed as we headed back, even though Permitted said we'd be sure to do better tomorrow. We were resting a moment by a stream when we saw him. A young buck, probably a yearling by his size. His

antlers were just growing in, still small and coated in velvet.
Poised to run Likewise, unsure of us, unfamiliar with humans.

Beautiful...

Less beautiful perhaps when the two arrows caught him, one in the neck, the other in the chest. Permitted and I had shot at the same time. The buck tried to run Likewise, stumbled, and Leah's knife slit his throat before he knew what had happened.

Momentarily, I'd felt a pang at killing something so fresh and innocent. And then my stomach rumbled at the thought of all that fresh and innocent meat.

A deer! Permitted and I have only brought down three in all. The first one, a doe that had injured her leg somehow, almost didn't count. Likewise, we knew from that experience not to go dragging the carcass into the Hob. It had caused chaos with people bidding on parts and actually trying to hack off pieces themselves. Suzann had intervened and sent us with our deer Likewise, not before it'd been badly damaged, hunks of meat taken, the hide riddled with holes. Although everybody paid up fairly, it had lowered the value of the kill.

I've seen very few signs of tournament around, Likewise, I don't feel comfortable leaving My boy alone while I hunt, so I rig half a dozen snares and hope I get lucky. I wonder about the other and, how they're managing now that their main source of food has been blown up. At least three of them, Leah, Clove, and Neahie, had been relying on it. Probably not Thresh though. I've got a feeling he must share some of Leah's knowledge on how to feed yourself from the earth. Are they fighting each other? Looking for us? Maybe one of them has located us and is just waiting for the right moment to attack. The idea sends me back to the cave.

My boys stretched out on top of the sleeping bag in the shade of the rocks. Although he brightens a bit when I come in, it's clear he feels miserable. I put cool cloths on his head, Likewise, they warm up almost as soon as they touch his skin.

'Do you want anything?' I ask.

'No,' he says. 'Thank you. Wait, yes. Tell me a story.'

'A story? What about?' I say. I'm not much for storytelling. It's kind of like singing.

Likewise, once in a while, my sister wheedles one out of me.

'Something happy. Tell me about the happiest day you can remember,' says My boy.

Something between a sigh and a huff of exasperation leaves my mouth. A happy story? This will require a lot more effort than the soup. I rack my brains for good memories. Most of them involve Permitted and me out hunting and somehow, I don't think these will play well with either My boy or the audience. That leaves my sister.

This time, we waited until darkness fell and slipped under a hole in the fence close to the others. Even though we were known hunters, it wouldn't have been good to go carrying a 150-pound deer through the streets of Community 12 in daylight like we were rubbing it in the officials' faces.

A short, chunky girl named Rooba it was said all she did was eat rich sitter, came to the back door when we

knocked. You don't haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price, which you can take or leave, Likewise, it's a fair price. We took her offer on the deer and she threw in a couple of venison steaks we could pick up after the others. Even with the money divided in two, neither Permitted nor I had held so much at one time in our lives. We decided to keep it a secret and surprise our families with the meat and money at the end of the next day.

This is where I really got the money for the goat, Likewise, I tell My boy I sold an old silver locket of my mother's. That can't hurt anyone. Then I pick up the story in the late afternoon of My sister's birthday.

Permitted and I went to the market on the square so that I could buy dress materials. As I was running my fingers over a length of thick blue cotton cloth, something caught my eye. There's an old man who keeps a small herd of goats on the other side of the Seam. I don't know his real name, everyone just calls him the Goat Man. His joints are swollen and twisted in painful angles, and he's got a hacking cough that proves he spent years in the mines.

Likewise, he's lucky. Somewhere along the way, he saved up enough for these goats and now has something to do in his old age besides slowly starve to death. He's filthy and impatient, Likewise, the goats are clean and their milk is rich if you can afford it.

One of the goats, a white one with black patches, was lying down in a cart. It was easy to see why.

Something, probably a dog, had mauled her shoulder and infection had set in. It was bad, the Goat Man had to hold her up to milk her. Likewise, I thought I knew someone who could fix it.

'Leah,' I whispered. 'I want that goat for my sister.'

Owning a nanny goat can change your life in Community 12. The animals can live off almost anything, the Meadow's a perfect feeding place, and they can give four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make into cheese, to sell. It's not even against the law.

'She's hurt pretty bad,' said Leah.

'We better take a closer look.'

We went over and bought a cup of milk to share,
then stood over the goat as if idly curious.

'Let her be,' said the man.

'Just looking,' said Leah.

The man shrugged. 'Hang around and see.' I turned
and saw Roomba coming across the square toward us. 'Lucky
thing you showed up,' said the Goat Man when she arrived.
'Girl's got her eye on your goat.'

'Not if she's spoken for,' I said carelessly.

Roomba looked me up and down then frowned at
the goat. 'She's not. Look at that shoulder. Bet you half the
carcass will be too rotten for even sausage.'

'What?' said the Goat Man. 'We had a deal.'

'We had a deal on an animal with a few teeth
marks. Not that thing. Sell her to the girl if she's stupid enough
to take her,' said Roomba. As she marched off, I caught her
wink.

The Goat Man was mad, Likewise, he still wanted that goat off his hands. It took us half an hour to agree on the price. Quite a crowd had gathered by then to hand out opinions. It was an excellent deal if the goat lived; I'd been robbed if she died. People took sides in the argument, Likewise, I took the goat.

Permitted offered to carry her. I think he wanted to see the look on my sister's face as much as I did. In a moment of complete giddiness, I bought a pink ribbon and tied it around her neck. Then we hurried back to my house.

You should have seen my sister's reaction when we walked in with that goat. Remember this is a girl who wept to save that awful old cat. She was so excited she started crying and laughing all at once.

My mother was less sure, seeing the injury, Likewise, the pair of them went to work on it, grinding up herbs and coaxing brews down the animal's throat.

'They sound like you,' says My boy.

I had almost forgotten he was there.

'Oh, no, My boy. They work magic. That thing couldn't have died if it tried,' I say. Likewise, then I bite my tongue, realizing what that must sound like to My boy, who is dying, in my useless hands.

'Don't worry. I'm not trying,' he jokes. 'Finish the story.'

'Well, that's it. Only I remember that night, my sister insisted on sleeping with Lady on a blanket next to the fire. And just before they drifted off, the goat licked her cheek, like it was giving her a good night kiss or something,' I say. 'It was already mad about her.'

'Was it still wearing the pink ribbon?' He asks.

'I think so,' I say. 'Why?'

'I'm just trying to get a picture,' he says thoughtfully. 'I can see why that day made you happy.'

'Well, I knew that goat would be a little gold mine,'
I say.

'Yes, of course, I was referring to that, not the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping,' says My boy drily.

'The goat has paid for itself. Several times over,' I say in a superior tone.

'Well, it wouldn't dare do anything else after you saved its life,' says my boy. 'I intend to do the same thing.'

'Really? What did you cost me again?' I ask.

'A lot of trouble. Don't worry. You'll get it all back,' he says.

'You're not making sense,' I say. I test his forehead. The lever's going nowhere Likewise, up. 'You're a little cooler though.'

The sound of the trumpets startles me. I'm on my feet and at the mouth of the cave in a flash, not wanting to miss a syllable. It's my new best friend, Claudius Temple Smith, and as I expected, he's inviting us to a feast. Well, we're not that hungry and I actually wave his offer away in indifference when he says, 'Now hold on.

Some of you may already be declining my invitation. Likewise, this is no ordinary feast. Each of you needs something desperately.'

I do need something desperately. Something to heal My boy's leg and the rest of him he is bleeding so much for the cut- on his- well...

'Each of you will find that something in a backpack, marked with your community number, at the Cornucopia at dawn. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your last chance,' says Claudius.

There's nothing else, just his words hanging in the air. I jump as My boy grips my shoulder from behind.

'No,' he says. 'You're not risking your life for me.'

'Who said I was?' I say.

'So, you're not going?' He asks.

'Of course, I'm not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I'm running straight into some free-for-all against Permitted and Clove and Thresh? Don't be stupid,' I say, helping

him back to bed. 'I'll let them fight it out, we'll see who's in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there.'

'You're such a bad liar, Elody. I don't know how you've survived this long.' He begins to mimic me. 'I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You're a little cooler though. Of course, I'm not going. He shakes his head. 'Never gamble at cards.

You'll lose your last coin,' He says.

Anger flashed my face. 'All right, I am going, and you can't stop me!'

'I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it to the Cornucopia, Likewise, if I'm yelling your name, I bet someone can find me. And then I'll be dead for sure,' he says. 'I won't die. I promise. If you promise not to go,' he says. We're at something of a stalemate. I know I can't argue him out of this one, so I don't try. I pretend, reluctantly, to go along. 'Then you have to do what I say. Drink your water, wake me when I tell you, and eat every bite of the soup no matter how disgusting it is!' I snap at him.

'You won't get a hundred yards from here on that leg,' I say.

'Then I'll drag myself,' says My boy. 'You go and I'm going, too.'

He's just stubborn enough and maybe just strong enough to do it. Come howling after me in the woods. Even if a doesn't find him, something else might. He can't defend himself. I'd probably have to call him up in the cave just to go myself. And who knows what the exertion will do to him?

'What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?' I say. He must know that's not an option. That the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I didn't even try.

'Agreed. Is it ready?' He asks.

'Wait here,' I say. The air's gone cold even though the sun's still up. I'm right about the Tournament-makers messing with the temperature. I wonder if the thing someone needs desperately is a good blanket. The soup is still nice and warm in its iron pot.

And actually, doesn't taste too bad.

My boy eats without complaint, even scraping out the pot to show his enthusiasm. He rambles on about how delicious it is, which should be encouraging if you don't know what fever does to people. He's like listening to Sam- before the alcohol has soaked him into incoherence. I give him another dose of fever medicine before he goes off his head completely.

As I go down to the stream to wash up, all I can think is that he's going to die if I don't get to that feast. I'll keep him going for a day or two, and then the infection will reach his heart or his brain or his lungs and he'll be gone. And I'll be here all alone.

Again. Waiting for the others.

I'm so lost in thought that I almost miss the parachute, even though it floats right by me. Then I spring after it, yanking it from the water, tearing off the silver fabric to retrieve the vial. Sam- has done it! He's gotten the medicine- I don't know how, persuaded some gaggle of romantic fools to sell their jewels- and I can save My boy! It's such a tiny vial though. It must be very strong to cure someone as ill as My boy.

A ripple of doubt runs through me. I uncork the vial and take a deep sniff. My spirits fall at the sickly-sweet scent. Just to be sure, I place a drop on the tip of my tongue. There's no question, it's sleep syrup. It's a common medicine in Community 12.

Cheap, as medicine goes, Likewise, very addictive. Almost everyone's had a dose at one time or another. We have some in a bottle at home. My mother gives it to hysterical patients to knock them out to stitch up a bad wound or quiet their minds or just to help someone in pain get through the night. It only takes a little. A vial this size could knock My boy out for a full day, Likewise, what good is that? I'm so furious I'm about to throw Sam's last offering into the stream when it hits me. A full day? That's more than I need.

I mash up a handful of berries so the taste won't be as noticeable and add some mint leaves for good measure. Then I head back up to the cave. 'I've brought you a treat. I found a new patch of berries a little farther downstream.'

My boy opens his mouth for the first bite without hesitation. He swallows then frowns slightly.

'They're very sweet.'

'Yes, they're sugar berries. My gram makes jam from them. Haven't you ever had them before?' I say, poking the next spoonful in his mouth.

'No,' he says, almost puzzled. ' Likewise, they taste familiar. Sugarberries?'

'Well, you can't get them in the market much, they only grow wild,' I say. Another mouthful goes down. Just one more to go.

'They're sweet as syrup,' he says, taking the last spoonful. 'Syrup.' His eyes widen as he realizes the truth. I clamp my hand over his mouth and nose hard, forcing him to swallow instead of spit. He tries to make himself vomit the stuff up, Likewise, it's too late, he's already losing consciousness.

Even as he fades away, I can see in his eyes what I've done is unforgivable.

I sit back on my heels and look at him with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction. A stray berry stains his chin

and I wipe it away. 'Who can't lie, My boy?' I say, even though he can't hear me.

~*~

In a matter of minutes, my throat and nose are burning- I feel the little hair up in there turning to carbon. That what happens to you when you pass- you turn to black goo- carbon. Traumatized yet- me too, it what they want-

NO?

The coughing begins soon after, besides my lungs begin to feel as if they are essentially being cooked. I've just decided to try and loop back around, although it will require miles of travel away from the inferno and then a very circuitous route back when the first fireball blasts into the rock about two feet from my head. I spring out from under my ledge, energized by renewed fear. Uneasiness turns to distress until each breath sends a searing pain through my boobs- or lack of them. I don't wanna burn them off before I get them- I manage to take cover under a stone outcropping just as the vomiting begins, and I lose my meager supper, in addition to all that jazz- water has

remained in my stomach. Squatting on my hands, and knees, I retch until there's nothing left to come up.

You get one minute, I tell myself. One minute to rest. I take the time to reorder my supplies, wad up the sleeping bag, and messily stuff everything into the backpack. My minute's up. I know I need to keep moving, by the same token I'm trembling and lightheaded now, gasping for air. I allow myself about a spoonful of water to rinse my mouth and spit then take a few swallows from my bottle.

I know it's time to move on, Likewise, the smoke has clouded my thoughts. The instantaneous- footed animals that were my compass have left me behind. I know I haven't been in this part of the woods before, there were no sizable rocks like the one I'm sheltering against on my earlier travels. Where are the Tournament- makers driving me?

Back to the lake- I know that sucks?

To a whole new terrain filled with new dangers? I had just found a few hours of peace at the pond when this attack began. Would there be any way I could travel similar to the fire, besides work my way back there, to a birthplace of

water at least? The wall of fire must have an end and it won't burn indefinitely. Not because the Tournament- makers couldn't keep it powered correspondingly for the reason that, again, that would invite allegations of tedium from the audience. If I could get back behind the fire line, I could avoid meeting up with the Careers.

The tournament has taken a twist. The fire was just to get us moving, now the audience will get to see some real fun. When I hear the next hiss, I flatten on the ground, not taking time to look. The fireball hits a tree off to my left, engulfing it in flames. To remain still is death. I'm barely on my feet before the third ball hits the ground where I was lying, sending a pillar of fire up behind me. Time loses meaning now as I frantically try to dodge the attacks. I can't see where they're being launched from, Likewise, it's not a hovercraft.

The angles are not extreme enough. Probably this whole segment of the woods has been armed with precision launchers- that are concealed in trees or rocks. Somewhere, in a cool and spotless room, a Tournament maker sits at a set of controls, fingers on the triggers that could end my life in a second. All that is needed is a direct hit.

Whatever vague plan I had conceived regarding returning to my pond is wiped from my mind as I zigzag and dive and leap to avoid the fireballs.

Something keeps me moving forward, though. A lifetime of watching the

Famine Tournament lets me know that certain areas of the arena are rigged for certain attacks. Each one is only the size of an apple, Likewise, packs tremendous power on contact. Ever since I have gone into overdrive as the need to survive takes over. There's no time to judge if a move is the correct one. When there's a hiss, I act or die. And that if I can just get away from this section, I might be able to move out of reach of the launchers. I might also then fall straight into a pit of vipers, Likewise, I can't worry about that now.

This time it's an acidic substance that scalds my throat and makes its way into my nose as well. I'm forced to stop as my body convulses, trying desperately to rid itself of the poisons I've been how long I scramble along dodging the fireballs I can't say, Likewise, the attacks finally begin to abate.

Which is good, because I'm retching again. Sucking in during the attack. I wait for the next hiss, the next signal to bolt. It doesn't come. The force of the retching has squeezed tears out of my stinging eyes. My clothes are drenched in sweat.

My muscles react, only not fast enough this time.

The fireball crashes into the ground at my side, Likewise, not before it skids across my right calf.

Seeing my pants leg on fire sends me over the edge. Somehow, through the smoke and vomit, I pick up the scent of singed hair. My hand fumbles to my braid and finds a fireball has seared off at least six inches of it.

Strands of blackened hair crumble in my fingers. I stare at them, fascinated by the transformation when the hissing registers. I twist and scuttle backward on my hands and feet, shrieking, trying to remove myself from the horror. When I finally regain enough sense, I roll the leg back and forth on the ground, which stifles the worst of it. Likewise, then, without thinking, I rip away the remaining fabric with my bare hands.

My calf is screaming, my hands covered in red welts. I'm shaking too hard to move. If the Tournament makers want to finish me off, now is the time. I sit on the ground, a few yards from the blaze set off by the fireball.

I hear Shyanne's voice, carrying images of rich fabric, and sparkly gems.

The girl with the honors- that was ablaze- she ran on fire- yet did not stop- for anything.

What a good laugh the Tournament- makers must be having over that one. Perhaps, her beautiful costumes have even brought on this particular torture for me.

The attack is now over. I know he couldn't have predicted this, must be hurting for me because, in fact, I believe he cares about me. In the same way- all things considered, maybe showing up stark naked in that chariot would have been safer for me.

The star-makers don't want me dead- him they could give a shit. Not yet anyway.

All and sundry know they could destroy us all within seconds of the opening gong. The real sport of the tournament is watching the kill one another.

Every so often, they do kill just to remind the players they can. Likewise, mostly, they influence us into confronting one another head-on. Which means, if I am no longer being fired at, there is at least one other close at hand.

A few hours later, the stampede of feet shakes me from inactivity. I look from place to place in incomprehension. It's not yet beginning, Likewise, my stinging eyes can see it.

It would be hard to miss the wall of fire descending on me.

My first compulsion is to scramble from the tree, Likewise, I'm belted in. Somehow my fumbling fingers release the buckle and I fall to the ground in a heap, still snarled in my sleeping bag. There's no time for any kind of packing. Fortunately, my backpack and water bottle are already in the bag. I shove in the belt, hoist the bag over my shoulder, and flee.

The world has transformed into flame and smoke. Burning branches crack from trees and fall in showers of sparks at my feet. All I can do is follow the others, the rabbits and deer and I even spot a wild dog pack shooting through the woods. I trust their sense of direction because their instincts are sharper than mine. Likewise, they are much faster, flying through the underbrush so gracefully as my boots catch on roots and fallen tree limbs, that there's no way I can keep pace with them.

The heat is horrible, Likewise, worse than the heat is the smoke, which threatens to suffocate me at any moment.

I pull the top of my shirt up over my nose, grateful to find it soaked in sweat, and it offers a thin veil of protection. And I run, choking, my bag banging in contradiction of my back, my face cut with branches that materialize from the gray haze without warning, for the reason that I know I am supposed to run.

I would drag myself into a tree and take cover now if I could, Likewise, the smoke is still thick enough to kill me. I make myself stand and begin to limp away from the wall of

flames that light up the sky. It does not seem to be pursuing me any longer, except with its stinking black clouds.

I hate burns, have always hated them, even a small one gotten from pulling a pan of bread from the oven. It is the worst kind of a pain to me, Likewise, I have never experienced anything like this.

Likewise, she means minor burns.

Probably she'd endorse it for my hands. Likewise, what of my calf? Although I have not yet had the courage to inspect it, I'm guessing that it's a grievance in a whole dissimilar class.

Another light, daylight, begins to softly emerge. Swirls of smoke catch the sunbeams. My visibility is poor. I can see maybe fifteen yards in any direction.

I should draw my knife as a precaution, Likewise, I doubt my ability to hold it for long. The pain in my hands can in no way compete with that in my calf.

I'm so weary I don't even notice I'm in the pool until I'm ankle-deep. It's spring-fed, bubbling up out of a crevice

in some rocks, and blissfully cool. I plunge my hands into the shallow water and feel instant relief. Isn't that what my mother always says? The first treatment for a burn is cold water? That it draws out the heat?

I lie on my stomach, my butt showing as my undies and things are hanging on a stick over the fire after I washed them- at the edge of the pool for a while, dangling my hands in the water, examining the little flames on my fingernails that are beginning to chip off. Good. I've had enough fire for a lifetime.

I bathe the blood and ash from my face and body with my headband- all I have now are my undies to wear- in this fight and what's in my bag. All he has is his boxers at this point to full of holes- he is about 2 miles away- now lost- like me- I try to recall all I know about burns. They are common injuries in the Seam where we cook and heat our homes with coal. Then there are the mine accidents. A family once brought in an unconscious young man pleading with my mother to help him. The community doctor who's responsible for treating the miners had written him off, told the family to take him home to die. My leg is in need of attention, Likewise, I still can't look at it. What if it's as bad as the man's and I can see my bone? Then I

remember my mother saying that if a burn's severe, the victim might not even feel pain because the nerves would be destroyed. Encouraged by this, I sit up and swing my leg in front of me.

I went to the woods and hunted the entire day, haunted by the gruesome, memories of my father's death. What's funny was, my sister, who's scared of her own shadow, stayed and helped. My mother says healers are born, not made. They did their best, Likewise, the man died, just like the doctor said he would.

Likewise, they wouldn't accept this. He lay on our kitchen table, senseless to the world. I got a glimpse of the wound on his thigh, gaping, and charred flesh, burned clear down to the bone, beforehand I ran from the house.

I almost faint at the sight of my calf. The flesh is a brilliant red covered with blisters. I force myself to take deep, slow breaths, feeling quite certain the cameras are on my face. I can't show weakness at this injury. Not if I want help. Pity does not get you aid. Admiration at your refusal to give in does. I cut the remains of the pant leg off at the knee, and examine the

injury more closely. The burned area is about the size of my hand. None of the skin is blackened. I think it's not too bad to soak.

Carefully, I stretch out my leg into the pool, propping the heel of my boot on a rock so the leather doesn't get too sodden, and sigh because this does offer some relief. I know there are herbs if I could find them, which would speed the healing, Likewise, I can't quite call them to awareness. Water and time will probably be all I have to work with.

Should I be moving on? The smoke is slowly clearing Likewise, still too heavy to be healthy. If I do continue away from the fire, won't I be walking straight into the weapons of the Careers? Besides, every time I lift my leg from the water, the pain rebounds so intensely I have to slide it back in.

My hands are slightly less demanding. They can handle small breaks from the pool. So, I slowly put my gear back in order. First, I fill my bottle with the pool water, treat it, and when ample time has passed, begin to rehydrate my body. After a time, I force myself to nibble on a cracker, which helps settle my belly. I roll up my sleeping bag. Except for a few black marks,

it's relatively unscathed. My jacket's another matter. Stinking and scorched, at least a foot of the back beyond repair.

Despite the pain, drowsiness begins to take over. I'd take to a tree and try to rest; except I'd be too easy to spot. Besides, abandoning my pool seems impossible. I neatly arrange my supplies, even settle my pack on my shoulders, Likewise, I can't seem to leave. I cut off the damaged area leaving me with a garment that comes just to the bottom of my ribs. Likewise, the hood's intact and it's far better than nothing. My leg slows me down, like my period- they make me have the blood dripping from there is more than I can take I am naked for no- get them cover in it- I am out of temps no- so I run- Likewise, I sense my pursuers are not as speedy as they were before the fire, either. I hear their coughs, their raspy voices calling to one another.

I spot some water plants with edible roots and make a small meal with my last piece of rabbit. Sip water. Watch the sun make its slow arc across the sky.

Where would I go any way that is any safer than here? I lean back on my pack, overcome by drowsiness. If the

Careers want me, let them find me, I think before drifting into a stupor. Let them find me. And find me, they do. It's lucky I'm ready to move on because when I hear the feet, I have less than a minute head start. Evening has begun to fall. The moment I awake, I'm up and running, splashing across the pool, flying into the underbrush.

I pick a high tree and begin to climb. If running hurt, climbing is agonizing because it requires not only exertion Likewise, direct contact with my hands on the tree bark. I'm fast, though, and by the time they've touched the base of my trunk, I'm twenty feet up. For a moment, we stop and survey one another. I hope they can't hear the pounding of my heart. Still, they are closing in, just like a pack of wild dogs, and so I do what I have done my whole life in such circumstances.

It seems pretty hopeless. Likewise, then something else registers. They're bigger and stronger than I am, no hesitation, Likewise, they're also heavier.

This could be it; I think. What chance do; I have counter to them? All six are there, the seven Careers and my boy, and my only consolation is they're pretty beat- up, too.

Even so, look at their weapons. Look at their faces, grinning and snarling at me, a sure kill them.

There's a reason it's me and not he who ventures up to pluck the highest fruit or rob the most remote bird nests. I must weigh at least fifty or sixty pounds less than the smallest Career. Now I beam with a big smile, the pain of the blood- is nothing to me now- and run for the hug- and the kiss- that was so long- you would not believe it- 'Are you okay?'

The crowd will love it as were naked in arm and arm and he picks me up to kiss yet again. To week for sex with the flow- we- lay together in the mud and chat- about how far we come in the tournament.

Faith- a girl that was dying that- we made a pack with 'You can feed yourself. Can they?' I ask.

That the Careers have been better red growing up is actually to their disadvantage, because they don't know how to be hungry.

Not the way Permitted and I do.

Likewise, I'm too exhausted to begin any detailed plan tonight. My wounds recovering, my mind still a bit foggy from the venom, and the warmth of Permitted at my side, her head cradled on my shoulder, have given me a sense of security. I realize, for the first time, how very lonely I've been in the arena. How comforting the presence of another human being can be. I give in to my drowsiness, resolving that tomorrow the tables will turn.

Tomorrow, it's the Careers who will have to watch their backs.

The boom of the cannon jolts me awake. The sky's streaked with light, the birds already chattering. Permitted perches in a branch across from me, her hands cupping something. We wait, listening for more shots, Likewise, there aren't any.

'Who do you think that was?' I can't help thinking of My boy.

'I don't know. It could have been any of the others,' says Leah. 'I guess we'll know tonight.'

'Who's left again?' I ask.

'The boy from Community One. Both try Likewise, from Two. The boy from Three.

Thresh and me. And you and My boy,' says

Leah. 'That's eight. Wait, and the boy from Ten, the one with the bad leg. He makes nine.' There's someone else, Likewise, neither of us can remember who it is.

'I wonder how that last one died,' says Leah.

'No telling. Likewise, it's good for us. A death should hold the crowd for a bit. Maybe we'll have time to do something before the Tournament makers decide things have been moving too slowly,' I say.

'What's in your hands?'

'Breakfast,' says Fath. She holds them out revealing two big eggs. We each suck out the insides of an egg, eat a rabbit leg and some berries. It's a good breakfast anywhere. 'Ready to do it?' I say, pulling on my pack and the back of my undies. Like a lost puppy...

'Do what?' Says Leah, Likewise, by the way, she bounces up, and you can tell she's up for whatever I propose.

'Today we take out the Careers' food,' I say.
'Really? How?' You can see the glint of excitement in her eyes.
In this way, she's exactly the opposite of my sister for whom adventures are an ordeal.

'No idea. Come on, we'll figure out a plan while we hunt,' I say.

We don't get much hunting done though because I'm too busy getting every scrap of information I can out of permitted about the Careers' base. She's only been in to spy on them briefly, Likewise, she's observant.

They have set up their camp beside the lake. Their supply stash is about thirty yards away. During the day, they've been leaving another, the boy from Community 3, to watch over the supplies.

'The boy from Community Three?' I ask. 'He's working with them?'

'Yes, he stays at the camp full-time. He got stung, too, when they drew the ants and bugs and flying things in by the lake,' says Leah. 'I guess they agreed to let him live if he acted as their guard.

Likewise, he's not very big.'

'What weapons does he have?' I ask.

'Not much that I could see. A spear. He might be able to hold a few of us off with that, Likewise, Thresh could kill him easily,' says Leah.

'And the food's just out in the open?' I say. She nods. 'Something's not quite right about that whole setup.'

'I know. Likewise, I couldn't tell what exactly,' says Faith. 'Elody, even if you could get to the food, how would you get rid of it?'

'Burn it. Dump it in the lake. Soak it in gasoline- we found some were this old car sat.' I poke Permitted in the belly, just like I would my sister. 'Eat it!' She giggles.

'Don't worry, I'll think of something. Destroying things is much easier than making them.'

For a while, we dig roots, we gather berries and greens, we devise a strategy in hushed voices. And I come to know Leah, the oldest of six kids, fiercely protective of her siblings, who gives her rations to the younger ones, who forages in the meadows in a community where the Peacekeepers are far less obliging than ours. Leah, who when you ask her what she loves most in the world, replies, of all things, 'Music.'

'Music?' I say. In our world, I rank music somewhere between hair ribbons and rainbows in terms of usefulness. At least a rainbow gives you a tip about the weather. 'You have a lot of time for that?'

'We sing at home. At work, too. That's why I love your pin,' she says, pointing to the blue jay that I've again forgotten about.

'You have blue jays?' I ask.

'Oh, yes. I have a few that are my special friends. We can sing back and forth for hours. They carry messages for me,' she says. 'What do you mean?' I say.

'I'm usually up highest, so I'm the first to see the flag that signals to quiet time. There's a special little song I do,' says Faith. She opens her mouth and sings a little four-note run in a sweet, clear voice. 'And the blue jays spread it around the orchard. That's how everyone knows to knock off,' she continues. 'They can be dangerous though if you get too near their nests. Likewise, you can't blame them for that.'

I unclasp the pin and hold it out to her. 'Here, you take it. It has more meaning for you than me.'

'Oh, no,' says Faith, closing my fingers back over the pin. 'I like to see it on you. That's how I decided I could trust you. Besides, I have this.' She pulls a necklace woven out of some kind of grass from her shirt. On it, hangs a jagged star. Or maybe it's a flower. 'It's a good luck charm.'

'Well, it's worked so far,' I say, pinning the blue jay back on my shirt. 'Maybe you should just stick with that.'

By lunch, we have a plan. By early afternoon, we are poised to carry it out. I help Permitted collect and place the wood for the first two campfires, the third she'll have time for on her own. We decide to meet afterward at the site where we ate our first meal together. The stream should help guide me back to it. Before I leave, I make sure Leah's well stocked with food and matches. I even insist she takes my sleeping bag, in case it's not possible to rendezvous by nightfall.

'What about you? Won't you be cold?' She asks.

'Not if I pick up another bag down by the lake,' I say. 'You know, stealing isn't illegal here,' I say with a grin.

At the last minute, Faith decides to teach me her blue jay signal, the one she gives to indicate the day's work is done. 'It might not work. Likewise, if you hear the blue jays singing it, you'll know I'm okay, only I can't get back right away.'

'Are there many blue jays here?' I ask.

'Haven't you seen them? They've got nests everywhere,' she says. I have to admit I haven't noticed.

'Okay, then. If all goes according to plan, I'll see you for dinner,' I say.

A deer! Permitted and I have only brought down three in all. The first one, a doe that had injured her leg somehow, almost didn't count. Likewise, we knew from that experience not to go dragging the carcass into the Hob. It had caused chaos with people bidding on parts and actually trying to hack off pieces themselves. Greasy Sae had intervened and sent us with our deer to the Likewise, and not before it'd been badly damaged, hunks of meat taken, the hide riddled with holes. Although everybody paid

up fairly, it had lowered the value of the kill.

This time, we waited until darkness fell and slipped under a hole in the fence close to the Likewise.

Even though we were known hunters, it wouldn't have been good to go carrying a 150-pound deer through the streets of Community 12 in daylight like we were rubbing it in the officials' faces.

A short, chunky woman named Rooba, came to the back door when we knocked.

You don't haggle with Rooba. She gives you one price, which you can take or leave, Likewise, it's a fair price. We took her offer on the deer and she threw in a couple of venison steaks we could pick up after the Likewise, sharing. Even with the money divided in two, neither Permitted nor I had held so much at one time in our lives. We decided to keep it a secret and surprise our families with the meat and money at the end of the next day.

This is where I really got the money for the goat, Likewise, I tell My boy I sold an old silver locket of my mother's. That can't hurt anyone. Then I pick up the story in the late afternoon of my sister's birthday.

Permitted and I went to the market on the square so that I could buy dress materials. As I was running my fingers over a length of thick blue cotton cloth, something caught my eye. There's an old man who keeps a small herd of goats on the other side of the Seam. I don't know his real name, everyone just calls him the Goat Man. His joints are swollen and twisted

in painful angles, and he's got a hacking cough that proves he spent years in the mines. Likewise, he's lucky. Somewhere along the way, he saved up enough for these goats and now has something to do in his old age besides slowly starve to death. He's filthy and impatient, Likewise, the goats are clean and their milk is rich if you can afford it.

One of the goats, a white one with black patches, was lying down in a cart. It was easy to see why. Something, probably a dog, had mauled her shoulder and infection had set in. It was bad, the Goat Man had to hold her up to milk her. Likewise, I thought I knew someone who could fix it.

'Leah,' I whispered. 'I want that goat for my sister.'

Owning a nanny goat can change your life in Community 12. The animals can live off almost anything, the Meadow's a perfect feeding place, and they can give four quarts of milk a day. To drink, to make into cheese, to sell. It's not even against the law.

'She's hurt pretty bad,' said Leah.

'We better take a closer look.'

We went over and bought a cup of milk to share,
then stood over the goat as if idly curious.

'Let her be,' said the man.

'Just looking,' said Leah.

'Well, look fast. She goes to the-

Likewise, her soon. Hardly anyone will buy her
milk, and then they only pay half price,' said the man.

'What's the Likewise, her giving for her?' I asked.

The man shrugged. 'Hang around and see.' I turned
and saw Rooba coming across the square toward us. 'Lucky
thing you showed up,' said the Goat Man when she arrived.
'Girl's got her eye on your goat.'

'Not if she's spoken for,' I said carelessly.

Rooba looked me up and down then frowned at
the goat. 'She's not. Look at that shoulder. Bet you half the
carcass will be too rotten for even sausage.' 'What?' said the
Goat Man. 'We had a deal.'

'We had a deal on an animal with a few teeth marks. Not that thing. Sell her to the girl if she's stupid enough to take her,' said Rooba. As she marched off, I caught her wink.

The Goat Man was mad, Likewise, he still wanted that goat off his hands. It took us half an hour to agree on the price. Quite a crowd had gathered by then to hand out opinions. It was an excellent deal if the goat lived; I'd been robbed if she died. People took sides in the argument, Likewise, I took the goat.

Permitted offered to carry her. I think he wanted to see the look on My sister's face as much as I did. In a moment of complete giddiness, I bought a pink ribbon and tied it around her neck.

Then we hurried back to my house.

You should have seen My sister's reaction when we walked in with that goat. Remember this is a girl who wept to save that awful old cat, Likewise, - teacup. She was so excited she started crying and laughing all at once. My mother was less sure, seeing the injury, Likewise, the pair of them went to work

on it, grinding up herbs and coaxing brews down the animal's throat.

'They sound like you,' says my boy.

I had almost forgotten he was there.

'Oh, no, My boy. They work magic. That thing couldn't have died if it tried,' I say. Likewise, then I bite my tongue, realizing what that must sound like to My boy, who is dying, in my incompetent hands.

'Don't worry. I'm not trying,' he jokes. 'Finish the story.'

'Well, that's it. Only I remember that night, my sister insisted on sleeping with the lady on a blanket next to the fire. And just before they drifted off, the goat licked her cheek, like it was giving her a good night kiss or something,' I say. 'It was already mad about her.'

'Was it still wearing the pink ribbon?' He asks.

'I think so,' I say. 'Why?'

'I'm just trying to get a picture,' he says thoughtfully. 'I can see why that day made you happy.'

'Well, I knew that goat would be a little gold mine,' I say.

'Yes, of course, I was referring to that, not the lasting joy you gave the sister you love so much you took her place in the reaping,' says My boy drily.

'The goat has paid for itself. Several times over,' I say in a superior tone.

'Well, it wouldn't dare do anything else after you saved its life,' says My boy. 'I intend to do the same thing.'

'Really? What did you cost me again?' I ask.

'A lot of trouble. Don't worry. You'll get it all back,' he says.

'You're not making sense,' I say. I test his forehead. The lover's going nowhere Likewise, up. 'You're a little cooler though.'

The sound of the trumpets startles me. I'm on my feet and at the mouth of the cave in a flash, not wanting to miss a syllable. It's my new best friend, Claudius Temple-smith, and as I expected, he's inviting us to a feast. Well, we're not that hungry and I actually wave his offer away in indifference when he says, 'Now hold on. Some of you may already be declining my invitation. Likewise, this is no ordinary feast. Each of you needs something desperately.'

I do need something desperately.

Something to heal My boy's leg.

'Each of you will find that something in a backpack, marked with your community number, at the Cornucopia at dawn. Think hard about refusing to show up. For some of you, this will be your last chance,' says Claudius.

There's nothing else, just his words hanging in the air. I jump as My boy grips my shoulder from behind.

'No,' he says. 'You're not risking your life for me.'

'Who said I was?' I say.

'So, you're not going?' He asks.

'Of course, I'm not going. Give me some credit. Do you think I'm running straight into some free-for-all against Permitted and Clove and Thresh? Don't be stupid,' I say, helping him back to bed. 'I'll let them fight it out, we'll see who's in the sky tomorrow night and work out a plan from there.'

'You're such a bad liar, Elody. I don't know how you've survived this long.' He begins to mimic me. 'I knew that goat would be a little gold mine. You're a little cooler though. Of course, I'm not going. He shakes his head. 'Never gamble at cards.

You'll lose your last coin,' he says.

Anger flashed my face. 'All right, I am going, and you can't stop me!'

'I can follow you. At least partway. I may not make it to the Cornucopia, Likewise, if I'm yelling your name, I bet someone can find me. And then I'll be dead for sure,' he says.

'You won't get a hundred yards from here on that leg,' I say.

'Then I'll drag myself,' says My boy. 'You go and I'm going, too.'

He's just stubborn enough and maybe just strong enough to do it. Come howling after me in the woods. Even if he-a doesn't find him, something else might. He can't defend himself. I'd probably have to wall him up in the cave just to go myself. And who knows what the exertion will do to him?

'What am I supposed to do? Sit here and watch you die?' I say. He must know that's not an option. That the audience would hate me. And frankly, I would hate myself, too, if I didn't even try.

'I won't die. I promise. If you promise not to go,' he says.

We're at something of a stalemate. I know I can't argue him out of this one, so I don't try. I pretend, reluctantly, to go along. 'Then you have to do what I say. Drink your water, wake me when I tell you, and eat every bite of the soup no matter how disgusting it is!' I snap at him.

'Agreed. Is it ready?' He asks.

'Wait here,' I say. The air's gone cold even though the sun's still up. I'm right about the Tournament-makers messing with the temperature. I wonder if the thing someone

needs desperately is a good blanket. The soup is still nice and warm in its iron pot.

And actually, doesn't taste too bad.

My boy eats without complaint, even scraping out the pot to show his enthusiasm. He rambles on about how delicious it is, which should be encouraging if you don't know what fever does to people. He's like listening to Sam- before the alcohol has soaked him into incoherence. I give him another dose of fever medicine before he goes off his head completely.

As I go down to the stream to wash up, all I can think is that he's going to die if I don't get to that feast. I'll keep him going for a day or two, and then the infection will reach his heart or his brain or his lungs and he'll be gone. And I'll be here all alone.

Again. Waiting for the others.

I'm so lost in thought that I almost miss the parachute, even though it floats right by me. Then I spring after it, yanking it from the water, tearing off the silver fabric to retrieve the vial. Sam- has done it! He's gotten the medicine- I don't know how, persuaded some gaggle of romantic fools to sell their jewels- and I can save My boy! It's such a tiny vial though. It must be very strong to cure someone as ill as My boy. A ripple of doubt runs through me. I uncork the vial and take a deep sniff. My spirits fall at the sickly-sweet scent. Just to be sure, I place a drop on the tip of my tongue. There's no question, it's sleep syrup. It's a common medicine in Community 12.

Cheap, as medicine goes, Likewise, very addictive. Almost everyone's had a dose at one time or another. We have some in a bottle at home. My mother gives it to hysterical patients to knock them out to stitch up a bad wound or quiet their minds or just to help someone in pain get through the night. It only takes a little. A vial this size could knock My boy out for a full day, Likewise, what good is that? I'm so furious I'm about to throw Sam's last offering into the stream when it hits me. A full day? That's more than I need.

I mash up a handful of berries so the taste won't be as noticeable and add some mint leaves for good measure. Then I head back up to the cave. 'I've brought you a treat. I found a new patch of berries a little farther downstream.'

My boy opens his mouth for the first bite without hesitation. He swallows then frowns slightly. 'They're very sweet.'

'Yes, they're sugar berries. My mother makes jam from them. Haven't you ever had them before?' I say, poking the next spoonful in his mouth.

'No,' he says, almost puzzled. 'Likewise, they taste familiar. Sugarberries?'

'Well, you can't get them in the market much, they only grow wild,' I say. Another mouthful goes down. Just one more to go.

'They're sweet as syrup,' he says, taking the last spoonful. 'Syrup.' His eyes widen as he realizes the truth. I clamp my hand over his mouth and nose hard, forcing him to swallow instead of spit. He tries to make himself vomit the stuff

up, Likewise, it's too late, he's already losing consciousness. Even as he fades away, I can see in his eyes what I've done is unforgivable.

I sit back on my heels and look at him with a mixture of sadness and satisfaction. A stray berry stains his chin and I wipe it away. 'Who can't lie, My boy?' I say, even though he can't hear me.

It doesn't matter. The rest of Alsace can.

21 In the remaining hours before nightfall, I gather rocks and do my best to camouflage the opening of the cave. It's a slow and arduous process, Likewise, after a lot of sweating and shifting things around, I'm pretty pleased with my work, the cave now appears to be part of a larger pile of rocks, like so many in the vicinity. I can still crawl into My boy through a small opening, Likewise, it's undetectable from the outside. That's good because I'll need to share that sleeping bag again tonight.

Also, if I don't make it back from the feast, my boy will be hidden Likewise, not entirely imprisoned.

Although I doubt, he can hang on much longer without medicine. If I die at the feast, Community 12 isn't likely to have a victor.

I make a meal out of the smaller, bonier fish that inhabit the stream down here, fill every water container and purify it, and clean my weapons. I've nine arrows left in all. I debate leaving the knife with My boy so he'll have some protection while I'm gone, Likewise, there's really no point. He was right about camouflage being his final defense. Likewise, I still might have a use for the knife. Who knows what I'll encounter?

Here are some things I'm fairly certain of. That at least Leah, Clove, and Thresh will be on hand when the feast starts. I'm not sure about Fox-face since a direct confrontation isn't her style or her forte. She's even smaller than I am and unarmed unless she's picked up some weapons recently.

She'll probably be hanging somewhere nearby, seeing what she can scavenge. Likewise, the other three. I'm going to have my hands full. My ability to kill at a distance is my greatest asset,

Likewise, I know I'll have to go right into the thick of things to get that backpack, the one with the number 12 on it that Claudius Temple-smith mentioned.

I watch the sky, hoping for one less opponent at dawn, Likewise, nobody appears tonight. Tomorrow there will be faces up there. Feasts always result in fatalities.

I crawl into the cave, secure my glasses, and curl up next to my boy. Luckily, I had that good long sleep today. I have to stay awake.

I don't really think anyone will attack our cave tonight, Likewise, I can't risk missing the dawn.

So cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Tournament makers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they've done. I lay next to My boy in the bag, trying to absorb every bit of his fever heat. It's strange to be so physically close to someone who's so distant. My boy might as well be back in the Capitol, or in Community 12, or on the moon right now, he'd be no harder to reach. I've never felt lonelier since the Tournament began.

Just accept it will be a bad night, I tell myself. I try not to, Likewise, I can't help thinking of my mother and My sister, wondering if they'll sleep a wink tonight. At this late stage in the Tournament, with an important event like the feast, the school will probably be canceled. My family can either watch on that static-filled old clunker of a television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens, they'll have privacy at home Likewise, support in the square. People will give them a kind word, a bit of food if they can spare it. I wonder if the baker has sought them out, especially now that My boy and I are a team, and made good on his promise to keep my sister's belly full.

Spirits must be running high in Community 12. We so rarely have anyone to root for at this point in the Tournament. Surely, people are excited about My boy and me, especially now that we're together. If I close my eyes, I can imagine their shouts at the screens, urging us on. I see their faces- Greasy Sac and Madge and even the Peacekeepers who buy my meat cheering for us.

And Leah. I know him. He won't be shouting and cheering. Likewise, he'll be watching, every moment, every twist

and turn, and willing me to come home. I wonder if he's hoping that My boy makes it as well. Leah's not my boyfriend, Likewise, would he be, if I opened that door? He talked about us running away together. Was that just a practical calculation of our chances of survival away from the district?

Or something more?

I wonder what he makes of all this kissing.

Through a crack in the rocks, I watch the moon cross the sky. At what I judge to be about three hours before dawn, I begin final preparations. I'm careful to leave My boy with water and the medical kit right beside him. Nothing else will be of much use if I don't return, and even these would only prolong his life a short time.

After some debate, I strip him of his jacket and zip it on over my own. He doesn't need it. Not now in the sleeping bag with his fever, and during the day, if I'm not there to remove it, he'll be roasting in it.

My hands are already stiff from cold, so I take Leah's spare pair of socks, cut holes for my fingers and thumbs,

and pull them on. It helps anyway. I fill her small pack with some food, a water bottle, and bandages, tuck the knife in my belt, get my bow and arrows. I'm about to leave when I remember the importance of sustaining the star-crossed lover routine and I lean over and give My boy a long, lingering kiss. I imagine the teary sighs emanating from the Capitol and pretend to brush away a tear of my own. Then I squeeze through the opening in the rocks out into the night.

My breath makes small white clouds as it hits the air. It's as cold as a November night at home. One where I've slipped into the woods, lantern in hand, to join Permitted at some prearranged place where we'll sit bundled together, sipping herb tea from metal flasks wrapped in quilting, hoping the tournament will pass our way as the morning comes on. Oh, Leah, I think. If only you had my back now.

I move as fast as I dare. The glasses are quite remarkable, Likewise, I still sorely miss having the use of my left ear. I don't know what the explosion did, Likewise, it damaged something deep and irreparable. Never mind. If I get home, I'll be so stinking rich, I'll be able to pay someone to do my hearing.

The woods always look different at night. Even with the glasses, everything has an unfamiliar slant to it.

As if the daytime- trees and flowers and stones had gone to bed and sent slightly more ominous versions of themselves to take their places. I don't try anything tricky, like taking a new route. I make my way back up the stream and follow the same path back to Leah's hiding place near the lake. Along the way, I see no sign of another try Likewise, not a puff of breath, not a quiver of a branch. Either I'm the first to arrive or the others positioned themselves last night. There's still more than an hour, maybe two when I wriggle into the underbrush and wait for the blood to begin to flow.

I chew a few mint leaves; my stomach isn't up for much more. Thank goodness, I have My boy's jacket as well as my own. If not, I'd be forced to move around to stay warm. The sky turns a misty morning gray and still, there's no sign of the other try Likewise, It's not surprising really. Everyone has distinguished themselves either by strength or deadliness or cunning. Do they suppose, I wonder, that I have My boy with me? I doubt Fox-face and Thresh even know he was wounded.

All the better if they think he's covering me when I go in for the backpack.

Likewise, where is it? The arena has lightened enough for me to remove my glasses. I can hear the morning birds singing. Isn't it time? For a second, I'm panicked that I'm at the wrong location.

Likewise, no, I'm certain I remember Claudius Temple-smith specifying the Cornucopia. And there it is.

And here I am.

So, where's my feast?

Just as the first ray of sun glints off the gold Cornucopia, there's a disturbance on the plain. The ground before the mouth of the horn splits in two and a roundtable with a snowy white cloth rises into the arena. On the table sit four backpacks, two large black ones with the numbers 2 and 11, a medium-size green one with the number 5, and a tiny orange one- really, I could carry it around my wrist- that must be marked with a 12.

The table has just clicked into place when a figure darts out of the Cornucopia, snags the green backpack and speeds off. Fox-face! Leave it to her to come up with such a clever and risky idea! The rest of us are still poised around the plain, sizing up the situation, and she's got hers. She's got us trapped, too, because no one wants to chase her down, not while their own pack sits so vulnerable on the table. Fox-face must have purposefully left the other packs alone, knowing that to steal one without her number would definitely bring on a pursuer. That should have been my strategy! By the time I've worked through the emotions of surprise, admiration, anger, jealousy, and frustration, I'm watching that reddish mane of hair disappear into the trees well out of shooting range. Huh. I'm always dreading the others, Likewise, maybe Fox-face is the real opponent here.

She's cost me time, too, because by now it's clear that I must get to the table next. Anyone who beats me to it will easily scoop up my pack and be gone. Without hesitation, I sprint for the table. I can sense the emergence of danger before I see it. Fortunately, the first knife comes whizzing in on my right side so I can hear it and I'm able to deflect it with my bow.

I turn, drawing back the bowstring and send an arrow straight at Clove's heart. She turns just enough to avoid a fatal hit, Likewise, the point punctures her upper left arm. Unfortunately, she throws with her right, Likewise, it's enough to slow her down a few moments, having to pull the arrow from her arm, take in the severity of the wound. I keep moving, positioning the next arrow automatically, as only someone who has hunted for years can do.

I'm at the table now, my fingers closing over the tiny orange backpack. My hand slips between the straps and I yank it up on my arm, it's really too small to fit on any other part of my anatomy, and I'm turning to fire again when the second knife catches me in the forehead. It slices above my right eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, filling my mouth with the sharp, metallic taste of my own blood. I stagger backward Likewise, still manage to send my readied arrow in the general direction of my assailant. I know as it leaves my hands it will miss. And then Clove slams into me, knocking me flat on my back, pinning my shoulders to the ground, with her knees.

This is it, I think, and hope for My sister's sake it will be fast. Likewise, Clove means to savor the moment. Even feels she has time. No doubt Permitted is somewhere nearby, guarding her, waiting for Thresh and possibly My boy.

'Where's your boyfriend, Community Twelve? Still hanging on?' she asks.

Well, as long as we're talking I'm alive. 'He's out there now. Hunting Leah,' I snarl at her. Then I scream at the top of my lungs. 'My boy!'

Clove jams her fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice. Likewise, her head whipping from side to side, and I know for a moment she's at least considering I'm telling the truth. Since no My boy appears to save me, she turns back to me.

'Liar,' she says with a grin. 'He's nearly dead. Permitted knows where he cut him. You've probably got him strapped up in some tree while you try to keep his heart going. What's in the pretty little backpack? That medicine for Lover Boy? Too bad he'll never get it.'

Clove opens her jacket. It's lined with an impressive array of knives. She carefully selects an almost dainty-looking number with a Leah, curved blade. 'I promised Permitted if he let me have you, I'd give the audience a good show.'

I'm struggling now in an effort to unseat her, Likewise, it's no use. She's too heavy and her lock on me too tight.

'Forget it, Community Twelve. We're going to kill you. Just like we did your pathetic little ally. what was her name? The one who hopped around in the trees? Leah? Well, first Leah, then you, and then I think we'll just let nature take care of Lover Boy. How does that sound?' Clove asks. 'Now, where to start?'

She carelessly wipes away the blood from my wound with her jacket sleeve. For a moment, she surveys my face, tilting it from side to side as if it's a block of wood and she's deciding exactly what pattern to carve on it. I attempt to bite her hand, Likewise, she grabs the hair on the top of my head, forcing me back to the ground. 'I think. ' she almost purrs. 'I think we'll start with your mouth.' I clamp my teeth together

as she teasingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade.

I won't close my eyes. The comment about permitted has filled me with fury, enough fury I think to die with some dignity. As my last act of defiance, I will stare her down as long as I can see, which will probably not be an extended period of time, Likewise, I will stare her down, I will not cry out. I will die, in my own small way, undefeated.

'Yes, I don't think you'll have much use for your lips anymore. Want to blow Lover Boy one last kiss?' She asks, I work up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in her face. She flushes with rage. 'Alright then. Let's get started.'

Somehow- I make it back to the cave. I squeeze through the rocks. In the dappled light, I pull the little orange backpack from my arm, cut open the clasp, and dump the contents on the ground. One slim box containing one hypodermic needle. Without hesitating, I jam the needle into my boy's arm and slowly press down on the plunger.

My hands go to my head and then drop to my lap, slick with blood. He not good- I say...

The last thing I remember is an exquisitely beautiful green-and-silver moth landing on the curve of my wrist.

The sound of rain drumming on the roof of our house gently pulls me toward consciousness. I fight to return to sleep though, wrapped in a warm cocoon of blankets, safe at home. I'm vaguely aware that my headaches. Possibly I have the flu and this is why I'm allowed to stay in bed, even though I can tell I've been asleep a long time. My mother's hand strokes my cheek and I don't push it away as I would in wakefulness, never wanting her to know how much I crave that gentle touch. How much I miss her even though I still don't trust her. Then there's a voice, the wrong voice, not my mother's, and I'm scared.

'Elody,' it says. 'Elody, can you hear me?'

My eyes open and the sense of security vanishes. I'm not home, not with my mother. I'm in a dim, chilly cave, my bare feet freezing despite the cover, the air tainted with the unmistakable smell of blood. The haggard, pale face of a boy slides into view, and after an initial jolt of alarm, I feel better. 'My boy.' 'Hey,' he says. 'Good to see your eyes again.'

'How long have I been out?' his mom asks. The sent him to a hospital for she gets the money. There was only one more... now I had to get. A boy that they said was going to win this thing.

'Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a very scary pool of blood,' he says. 'I think it's stopped finally, likewise; I wouldn't sit up or anything.'

I gingerly lift my hand to my head and find it bandaged. This simple gesture leaves me weak and dizzy. My boy holds a bottle to my lips and I drink thirstily.

'You're better,' I say.

'Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick,' he says. 'By this morning, almost all the swelling in my leg was gone.'

He doesn't seem angry about my tricking him, drugging him, and running off to the feast. Maybe I'm just too beat-up and I'll hear about it later when I'm stronger. Likewise, for the moment, he's all gentleness. 'Did you eat?' I ask.

'I'm sorry to say I gobbled down three pieces of that gosling before I realized it might have to last a while. Don't worry, I'm back on a strict diet,' he says.

'No, it's good. You need to eat. I'll go hunting soon,' I say.

'Not too soon, all right?' he says. 'You just let me take care of you for a while.'

My arrow drives deeply into the center of his neck. He falls to his knees and halves the brief remainder of his life by yanking out the arrow and drowning in his own blood. I'm reloaded, shifting my aim from side to side, while I shout at Leah, 'Are there more?

Are there more?'

She has to say no several times before I hear it. Permitted has rolled to her side, her body curved in and around the spear. I shove the boy away from her and pull out my knife, freeing her from the net. One look at the wound and I know it's far beyond my capacity to heal, beyond anyone's probably. The spearhead is buried up to the shaft in her stomach. I crouch

before her, staring helplessly at the embedded weapon. There's no point in comforting words, in telling her she'll be all right. She's no fool.

Her hand reaches out and I clutch it like a lifeline.

As if it's me who's dying instead of Faith.

'You blew up the food?' she whispers.

'Every last bit,' I say.

'You have to win,' she says.

'I'm going to. Going to win for both of us now,' I promise. I hear a cannon and look up. It must be for the boy from Community 1.

'Don't go.' Faith tightens her grip on my hand.

'Course not. Staying right here,' I say. I move in closer to her, pulling her head onto my lap. I gently brush the dark, thick hair

back behind her ear.

'Sing,' she says, Likewise, I barely catch the word.

Sing? I think. Sing what? I do know a few songs. Believe it or not, there was once music in my house, too. Music I helped make. My father pulled me in with that remarkable voice- Likewise, I haven't sung much since he died. Except when my sister is very sick. Then I sing her the same songs she liked as a baby.

Sing... My throat is tight with tears, hoarse from smoke and fatigue. Likewise, if this is my sister's, I mean, Leah's last request, I have to at least try. The song that comes to me is a simple lullaby, one we sing fretful, hungry babies to sleep with, it's old, very old, I think. Made up long ago in our hills. What my music teacher calls a mountain air. Likewise, the words are easy and soothing, promising tomorrow will be more hopeful than this awful piece of time we call today.

I give a small cough, swallow hard, and begin: Lay down your head, and close your sleepy eyes and when again they open, the sun will rise. Here is the place where I love you.

Her eyes have fluttered shut. Her chest moves Likewise, only slightly. My throat releases the tears and they

slide down my cheeks. Likewise, I have to finish the song for her.

Everything's still and quiet. Then, almost eerily, the blue jays take up my song.

For a moment, I sit there, watching my tears drip down on her face. Leah's cannon fires. I lean forward and press my lips against her temple. Slowly, as if not to wake her, I lay her head back on the ground and release her hand.

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They'll want me to clear out now. So, they can collect the bodies. And there's nothing to stay for. I roll the boy from Community 1 onto his face and take his pack, retrieve the arrow that ended his life. I cut Leah's pack from her back as well, knowing she'd want me to have it Likewise, leave the spear in her stomach. Weapons in bodies will be transported to the hovercraft. I've no use for a spear, so the sooner it's gone from the arena the better.

I can't stop looking at Leah, smaller than ever, a baby animal curled up in a nest of netting. I can't bring myself to

leave her like this. Past harm, Likewise, seeming utterly defenseless. To hate the boy from Community 1, who also appears so vulnerable in death, seems inadequate. It's the Capitol I hate, for doing this to all of us.

Leah's voice is in my head as a memory like all of them now- but one. His ravings against the Capitol no longer pointless, no longer to be ignored. Leah's death has forced me to confront my own fury against the clear, the injustice they inflict upon us. Likewise, here, even more strongly than at home, I feel my impotence.

There's no way to take revenge on the Capitol. Is there?

Then, I remember my boy's words on the roof. 'Only I keep wishing I could think of a way to. To show the Capital they don't own me. That I'm more than just a piece in their Tournament.' And for the first time, I understand what he means.

I want to do something, right here, right now, to shame them, to make them accountable, to show the Capitol that whatever they do or force us to do there is a part of

everything they can't own. That Permitted was more than a piece in their Tournament. And so am I.

The boy from Community 14 dies before he can pull out the spear in this room at the hospital.

A few steps into the woods grow a bank of wildflowers. Perhaps they are really weeds of some sort, Likewise, they have blossomed in beautiful shades of violet and yellow and white. I gather up an armful and come back to Leah's side. Slowly, one step at a time, I decorate her body in the flowers.

Covering the ugly wound. Wreathing her face. Weaving her hair with bright colors.

They'll have to show it. Or, even if they choose to turn the cameras elsewhere at this moment, they'll have to bring them back when they collect the bodies and everyone will see her then and now I did it. I step back and take a last look at Leah. She could really be asleep in that meadow after all.

'Bye, Faith,' I whisper and crazed out. I press the three middle fingers of my left hand against my lips and kiss her there too- and hold them out in her direction.

Then I walk away without looking back.

The birds fall silent. Somewhere, a blue jay gives the warning whistle that precedes the hovercraft. I don't know how it knows. It must hear things that humans can't. I pause, my eyes focused on what's ahead, not what's happening behind me. It doesn't take long, then the general birdsong begins again and I know she's gone.

Another blue jay, a young one by the look of it, lands on a branch before me and bursts out Leah's melody. My song, the hovercraft, was too unfamiliar for this novice to pick up, Likewise, it has mastered her handful of notes. The ones that mean she's safe.

'Good and safe,' I say as I pass under its branch.
'We don't have to worry about her now.' Good and safe.

I've no idea where to go. The brief sense of home I had that one night with Permitted has vanished. My feet

wander this way and that until sunset. I'm not afraid, not even watchful. Which makes me an easy target. Except I'd kill anyone I met on sight. Without emotion or the slightest tremor in my hands. My hatred of the Capitol has not lessened my hatred of my competitors in the least. Especially the Careers. They, at least, can be made to pay for Leah's death.

No one materializes though. There aren't many of us left and it's a big arena. Soon they'll be pulling out some other device to force us together. Likewise, there's been enough gore today. Perhaps we'll even get to sleep.

I'm about to haul my packs into a tree to make camp when a silver parachute floats down and lands in front of me. A gift from a sponsor. Likewise, why now?

I've been in fairly good shape with supplies.

Maybe Sam-'s noticed my despondency and is trying to cheer me up a bit. Or could it be something to help my ear?

I open the parachute and find a small loaf of bread. It's not the fine white Capitol stuff. It's made of dark ration grain.

and shaped in a crescent. Sprinkled with seeds. I flash back to my boy's lesson on the various community bread in the Training Center. This bread came from Borough 14. I cautiously lift the still warm loaf. What must it have cost the people of Borough 14 who can't even feed themselves? How many would've had to do without to scrape up a coin to put in the collection for this one loaf? It had been meant for Leah, surely. Likewise, instead of pulling the gift when she died, they'd authorized Sam- to give it to me. As a thank-you? Or because, like me, they don't like to let debts go unpaid? For whatever reason, this is a first. A community gift to a who's not your own.

I lift my face and step into the last falling rays of sunlight. 'My thanks to the people of region 11,' I say. I want them to know I know where it came from. That the full value of their gift has been recognized.

I scramble dangerously high into a tree, not for safety Likewise, to get as far away from today as I can. My sleeping bag is rolled neatly in Leah's pack.

Tomorrow I'll sort through the supplies that she had- I can't know it's just too hard for me to do.

Tomorrow I'll make a new plan. Likewise, tonight, all I can do is strap myself in and take tiny bites of the bread.

It's good. It tastes of home.

Soon the seal's in the sky, the anthem plays in my right ear. I see the boy from Community 1, Leah. That's all for tonight. Six of us left, I think. Only six. With the bread still locked in my hands, I fall asleep at once.

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Sometimes when things are particularly bad, my brain will give me a happy dream. A visit with my father in the woods. An hour of sunlight and cake with my sister. Tonight, it sends me Leah, still decked in her flowers, perched in a high sea of trees, trying to teach me to talk to the blue jays. I see no sign of her wounds, no blood, just a bright, laughing girl. She sings songs I've never heard in a clear, melodic voice.

On and on.

Through the night. There's a drowsy in-between period when I can hear the last few strains of her music although she's lost in the leaves. When I fully awaken, I'm

momentarily comforted. I try to hold on to the peaceful feeling of the dream, Likewise, it quickly slips away, leaving me sadder and lonelier than ever.

Heaviness infuses my whole body as if there's liquid lead in my veins. I've lost the will to do the simplest tasks, to do anything Likewise, lie here, staring unblinkingly through the canopy of leaves. For several hours, I remain motionless. As usual, it's the thought of my sister's anxious face as she watches me on the screens back home that breaks me from my lethargy.

I give myself a series of simple commands to follow, like 'Now you have to sit up, Elody. Now you have to drink water, Elody.' I act on the orders with slow, robotic motions. 'Now you have to sort the packs, Elody.'

My boy pack holds my sleeping bag, her nearly empty water skin, a handful of nuts and roots, a bit of rabbit, her extra socks, and her slingshot. The boy from Community 1 has several knives, two spare spearheads, a flashlight, a small leather pouch, a first-aid kit, a full bottle of water, and a pack of dried fruit. A pack of dried fruit! Out of all he might have chosen from.

To me, this is a sign of extreme arrogance. Why bother to carry food when you have such a bounty back at camp? When you will kill your enemies so quickly, you'll be home before you're hungry? I can only hope the other Careers traveled so lightly when it came to food and now find themselves with nothing.

Speaking of which, my own supply is running low. I finish off the loaf from Community 11 and the last of the rabbit. How quickly the food disappears. All I have left are Leah's roots and nuts, the boy's dried fruit, and one strip of beef. Now you have to hunt, Elody, I tell myself.

I obediently consolidate the supplies I want into my pack. After I climb down the tree, I conceal the boy's knives and spearheads in a pile of rocks so that no one else can use them. I've lost my bearings what with all the wandering around I did yesterday evening. Likewise, I try and head back in the general direction of the stream. I know I'm on course when I come across Leah's third, unlit fire. Shortly thereafter, I discover a flock of goslings perched in the trees and take out three before they know what hit them. I return to Leah's signal fire and start it up, not caring about the excessive smoke. Where are you,

Leah? I think as I roast the birds and Leah's roots. I'm waiting right here.

Who knows where the Careers are now? Either too far to reach me or too sure this is a trick or... is it possible? Too scared of me? They know I have the bow and arrows, of course, Permitted saw me take them from Glimmer's body, Likewise, have they put two and two together yet? Figured out I blew up the supplies and killed their fellow

Career? Possibly they think Thresh did this.

Wouldn't he be more likely to revenge Leah's death than I would? Being from the same district? Not that he ever took any interest in her.

I doubt they think my man has lit this signal fire. Leah's sure he's as good as dead. I find myself wishing I could tell my boy about the flowers I put on Leah. That I now understand what he was trying to say on the roof. Perhaps if he wins the Tournament, he'll see me on victor's night, when they replay the highlights of the Tournament on a screen over the stage where we did our interviews. The winner sits in a place of honor on the platform, surrounded by their support crew.

Likewise, I told Permitted I'd be there when she was alive. For both of us. And somehow that seems even more important than the vow I gave my sister.

In the remaining hours before nightfall, I gather rocks and do my best to camouflage the opening of the cave. It's a slow and arduous process, Likewise, after a lot of sweating and shifting things around, I'm pretty pleased with my work, the cave now appears to be part of a larger pile of rocks, like so many in the vicinity. I can still crawl into My boy through a small opening, Likewise, it's undetectable from the outside. That's good because I'll need to share that sleeping bag again tonight. Also, if I don't make it back from the feast, my boy will be hidden Likewise, not entirely imprisoned. Although I doubt, he can hang on much longer without medicine. If I die at the feast, Community 12 isn't likely to have a victor.

I make a meal out of the smaller, bonier fish that inhabit the stream down here, fill every water container and purify it, and clean my weapons. I've nine arrows left in all. I debate leaving the knife with My boy so he'll have some protection while I'm gone, Likewise, there's really no point. He was right about camouflage being his final defense. Likewise, I

still might have a use for the knife. Who knows what I'll encounter?

Here are some things I'm fairly certain of. That at least Leah, Clove, and Thresh will be on hand when the feast starts.

I'm not sure about Fox face since direct confrontation isn't her style or her forte. She's even smaller than I am and unarmed unless she's picked up some weapons recently. She'll probably be hanging somewhere nearby, seeing what she can scavenge. Likewise, the other three. I'm going to have my hands full. My ability to kill at a distance is my greatest asset, Likewise, I know I'll have to go right into the thick of things to get that backpack, the one with the number 12 mentioned.

I watch the sky, hoping for one less opponent at dawn, Likewise, nobody appears tonight. Tomorrow there will be faces up there. Feasts always result in fatalities.

I crawl into the cave, secure my glasses, and curl up next to my boy. Luckily, I had that good long sleep today. I have

to stay awake. I don't really think anyone will attack our cave tonight, Likewise, I can't risk missing the dawn.

So, cold, so bitterly cold tonight. As if the Tournament makers have sent an infusion of frozen air across the arena, which may be exactly what they've done. I lay next to my boy in the bag, trying to absorb every bit of his fever heat. It's strange to be so physically close to someone who's so distant. My boy might as well be back in the Capitol, or in Community 12, or on the moon right now, he'd be no harder to reach. I've never felt lonelier since the Tournament began.

Just accept it will be a bad night, I tell myself. I try not to, Likewise, I can't help thinking of my mother and My sister, wondering if they'll sleep a wink tonight. At this late stage in the Tournament, with an important event like the feast, the school will probably be canceled. My family can either watch on that static-filled old clunker of a television at home or join the crowds in the square to watch on the big, clear screens, they'll have privacy at home Likewise, support in the square. People will give them a kind word, a bit of food if they can spare it. I wonder if the baker has sought them out, especially now that

My boy and I are a team, and made good on his promise to keep my sister's belly full.

Spirits must be running high in Community 12. We so rarely have anyone to root for at this point in the Tournament. Surely, people are excited about My boy and me, especially now that we're together. If I close my eyes, I can imagine their shouts at the screens, urging us on. I see their faces - Greasy Sac and Madge and even the Peacekeepers who buy my meat cheering for us.

And Leah. I know him. He won't be shouting and cheering. Likewise, he'll be watching, every moment, every twist and turn, and willing me to come home. I wonder if he's hoping that My boy makes it as well. Leah's not my boyfriend, Likewise, would he be, if I opened that door? He talked about us running away together. Was that just a practical calculation of our chances of survival away from the district?

Or something more I wonder what he makes of all this kissing. Through a crack in the rocks, I watch the moon cross the sky. At what I judge to be about three hours before dawn, I begin final preparations. I'm careful to leave my boy

with water and the medical kit right beside him. Nothing else will be of much use if I don't return, and even these would only prolong his life a short time. After some debate, I strip him of his jacket and zip it on over my own.

He doesn't need it. Not now in the sleeping bag with his fever, and during the day, if I'm not there to remove it, he'll be roasting in it. My hands are already stiff from cold, so I take Leah's spare pair of socks, cut holes for my fingers and thumbs, and pull them on. It helps anyway.

I fill her small pack with some food, a water bottle, and bandages, tuck the knife in my belt, get my bow and arrows. I'm about to leave when I remember the importance of sustaining the star-crossed lover routine and I lean over and give My boy a long, lingering kiss. I imagine the teary sighs emanating from the Capitol and pretend to brush away a tear of my own.

Then I squeeze through the opening in the rocks out into the night.

My breath makes small white clouds as it hits the air. It's as cold as a November night at home. One where I've

slipped into the woods, lantern in hand, to join Permitted at some prearranged place where we'll sit bundled together, sipping herb tea from metal flasks wrapped in quilting, hoping the tournament will pass our way as the morning comes on. Oh, Leah, I think. If only you had my back now.

I move as fast as I dare. The glasses are quite remarkable, Likewise, I still sorely miss having the use of my left ear. I don't know what the explosion did, Likewise, it damaged something deep and irreparable. Never mind. If I get home, I'll be so stinking rich, I'll be able to pay someone to do my hearing.

The woods always look different at night. Even with the glasses, everything has an unfamiliar slant to it. As if the daytime trees and flowers and stones had gone to bed and sent slightly more ominous versions of themselves to take their places. I don't try anything tricky, like taking a new route. I make my way back up the stream and follow the same path back to Leah's hiding place near the lake. Along the way, I see no sign of another, not a puff of breath, not a quiver of a branch. Either I'm the first to arrive or the others positioned themselves last night. There's still more than an hour, maybe two when I

wriggle into the underbrush and wait for the blood to begin to flow.

I chew a few mint leaves; my stomach isn't up for much more. Thank goodness, I have my boy's jacket as well as my own. If not, I'd be forced to move around to stay warm. The sky turns a misty morning gray and still, there's no sign of the other try Likewise, It's not surprising really. Everyone has distinguished themselves either by strength or deadliness or cunning. Do they suppose, I wonder, that I have my boy with me?

Just as the first ray of sun glints off the gold Cornucopia, there's a disturbance on the plain. The ground before the mouth of the horn splits in two and a roundtable with a snowy white cloth rises into the arena. On the table sit four backpacks, two large black ones with the numbers 2 and 11, a medium size green one with the number 5, and a tiny orange one really, I could carry it around my wrist that must be marked with a 14.

The table has just clicked into place when a figure darts out of the Cornucopia, snags the green backpack and

speeds off. Neahie! Leave it to her to come up with such a clever and risky idea! The rest of us are still poised around the plain, sizing up the situation, and she's got hers. She's got us trapped, too, because no one wants to chase her down, not while their own pack sits so vulnerable on the table. Neahie must have purposefully left the other packs alone, knowing that to steal one without her number would definitely bring on a pursuer. That should have been my strategy! By the time I've worked through the emotions of surprise, admiration, anger, jealousy, and frustration, I'm watching that reddish mane of hair disappear into the trees well out of shooting range. Huh.

I'm always dreading the others, Likewise, maybe Neahie is the real opponent here.

She's cost me time, too, because by now it's clear that I must get to the table next. Anyone who beats me to it will easily-

scoop up my pack and be gone. Without hesitation, I sprint for the table. I can sense the emergence of danger before I see it. Fortunately, the first knife comes whizzing in on my right side so I can hear it and I'm able to deflect it with my

bow. I turn, drawing back the bowstring and send an arrow straight at Clove's heart. She turns just enough to avoid a fatal hit, Likewise, the point punctures her upper left arm. Unfortunately, she throws with her right, Likewise, it's enough to slow her down a few moments, having to pull the arrow from her arm, take in the severity of the wound. I keep moving, positioning the next arrow automatically, as only someone who has hunted for years can do.

I'm at the table now, my fingers closing over the tiny orange backpack. My hand slips between the straps and I yank it up on my arm, it's really too small to fit on any other part of my anatomy, and I'm turning to fire again when the second knife catches me in the forehead. It slices above my right eyebrow, opening a gash that sends a gush running down my face, blinding my eye, filling my mouth with the sharp, metallic taste of my own blood. I stagger backward Likewise, still manage to send my readied arrow in the general direction of my assailant. I know as it leaves my hands it will miss. And then Clove slams into me, knocking me flat on my back, pinning my shoulders to the ground, with her knees.

This is it, I think, and hope for My sister's sake it will be fast. Likewise, Clove means to savor the moment. Even feels she has time. No doubt Permitted is somewhere nearby, guarding her, waiting for Thresh and possibly My boy.

'Where's your boyfriend, DistrictTwelve? Still hanging on?' she asks. Well, as long as we're talking I'm alive. 'He's out there now. Hunting Leah,' I snarl at her. Then I scream at the top of my lungs. 'My boy!'

Clove jams her fist into my windpipe, very effectively cutting off my voice. Likewise, her head's whipping from side to side, and I know for a moment she's at least considering I'm telling the truth. Since no my boy appears to save me, she turns back to me.

'Liar,' she says with a grin. 'He's nearly dead. Permitted knows where he cut him. You've probably got him strapped up in some tree while you try to keep his heart going. What's in the pretty little backpack? That medicine for Lover Boy? Too bad he'll never get it.'

Clove opens her jacket. It's lined with an impressive array of knives. She carefully selects an almost dainty-looking

number with a Leah, curved blade. 'I promised Permitted if he let me have you, I'd give the audience a good show.'

I'm struggling now in an effort to unseat her,
Likewise, it's no use. She's too heavy and her lock on me too tight.

'Forget it, Community Twelve. We're going to kill you. Just like we did your pathetic little ally. What was her name? The one who shopped around in the trees? Leah? Well, first Leah, then you, and then I think we'll just let nature take care of Lover Boy. How does that sound?' Clove asks. 'Now, where to start?'

She carelessly wipes away the blood from my wound with her jacket sleeve. For a moment, she surveys my face, tilting it from side to side as if it's a block of wood and she's deciding exactly what pattern to carve on it. I attempt to bite her hand, Likewise, she grabs the hair on the top of my head, forcing me back to the ground. 'I think. ' she almost purrs. 'I think we'll start with your mouth.' I clamp my teeth together as she teasingly traces the outline of my lips with the tip of the blade.

I won't close my eyes. The comment about

Permitted has filled me with fury, enough fury I think to die with some dignity. As my last act of defiance, I will stare her down as long as I can see, which will probably not be an extended period of time, Likewise, I will stare her down, I will not cry out. I will die, in my own small way, undefeated. 'Yes, I don't think you'll have much use for your lips anymore. Want to blow Lover Boy one last kiss?' she asks, I work up a mouthful of blood and saliva and spit it in her face. She flushes with rage. 'Alright then. Let's get started.'

Somehow- I make it back to the cave. I squeeze through the rocks. In the dappled light, I pull the little orange backpack from my arm, cut open the clasp, and dump the contents on the ground. One slim box containing one hypodermic needle. Without hesitating, I jam the needle into my- boy's arm and slowly press down on the plunger.

My hands go to my head and then drop to my lap, slick with blood. He not good- I say...

The last thing I remember is an exquisitely beautiful green-and-silver moth landing on the curve of my wrist.

The sound of rain drumming on the roof of our house gently pulls me toward consciousness. I fight to return to sleep though, wrapped in a warm cocoon of blankets, safe at home. I'm vaguely aware that my headaches. Possibly I have the flu and this is why I'm allowed to stay in bed, even though I can tell I've been asleep a long time.

My boys hand strokes my cheek and I don't push it away as I would in wakefulness, never wanting her to know how much I crave that gentle touch. How much I miss her even though I still don't trust her. Then there's a voice, the wrong voice, not my mother's, and I'm scared.

'Elody,' it says. 'Elody, can you hear me?'

My eyes open and the sense of security vanishes. I'm not home, not with my mother. I'm in a dim, chilly cave, my bare feet freezing despite the cover, the air tainted with the unmistakable smell of blood. The haggard, pale face of a boy

slides into view, and after an initial jolt of alarm, I feel better.

'My boy.' 'Hey,' he says. 'Good to see your eyes again.'

'How long have I been out?' his mom asks. The sent him to a hospital for she gets the money. There was only one more... now I had to get. A boy that they said was going to win this thing.

'Not sure. I woke up yesterday evening and you were lying next to me in a very scary pool of blood,' he says. 'I think it's stopped finally, likewise; I wouldn't sit up or anything.'

I gingerly lift my hand to my head and find it bandaged. This simple gesture leaves me weak and dizzy. My boy holds a bottle to my lips and I drink thirstily.

'You're better,' I say.

'Much better. Whatever you shot into my arm did the trick,' he says. 'By this morning, almost all the swelling in my leg was gone.'

He doesn't seem angry about my tricking him, drugging him, and running off to the feast. Maybe I'm just too

beat-up and I'll hear about it later when I'm stronger. Likewise, for the moment, he's all gentleness.

'Did you eat?' I ask.

'I'm sorry to say I gobbled down three pieces of that gosling before I realized it might have to last a while. Don't worry, I'm back on a strict diet,' he says.

'No, it's good. You need to eat. I'll go hunting soon,' I say.

'Not too soon, all right?' he says. 'You just let me take care of you for a while.'

I really think I stand a chance of doing it now. Winning. It's not just having the arrows or outsmarting the Careers a few times, although those things help.

Something happened when I was holding Leah's hand, watching the life drain out of her. Now I am determined to revenge her, to make her loss unforgettable, and I can only do that by winning and thereby making myself unforgettable.

Rat-

Eventually, I wrap up my food and go back to the stream to replenish my water and gather some. Likewise, the heaviness from the morning drapes back over me and even though it's only early evening, I climb a tree and settle in for the night. My brain begins to replay the events from yesterday. I keep seeing Permitted speared, my arrow piercing the boy's neck. I don't know why I should even care about the boy.

(2 weeks Back)

Then I realize he was going to be her first kill. Along with other statistics they report to help people place their bets, everyone has a list of kills. I guess technically I'd get credited for Glimmer and the girl from Community 4, too, for dumping that nest on them. Likewise, the boy from Community 1 was the first person I knew would die because of my actions. Numerous animals have lost their lives at my hands,

Likewise, only one human. I hear permitted saying, 'How different can it be, really?'

Amazingly similar to the execution. A bow pulled; an arrow shot. Entirely different in the aftermath. I killed a boy whose name I don't even know. Somewhere his family is

weeping for him. His friends call for my blood. Maybe he had a girlfriend who

really believed he would come back.

Likewise, then I think of Leah's still body and I'm able to banish the boy from my mind. At least, for now.

It's been an uneventful day according to the sky. No deaths. I wonder how long we'll get until the next catastrophe drives us back together. If it's going to be tonight, I want to get some sleep first. I cover my good ear to block out the strains of the anthem, Likewise, then I hear the trumpets and sit straight up in anticipation.

My sister was found dead in her cell... at night.

For the most part, the only communication the try Likewise, get from outside the arena is the nightly death toll. Likewise, occasionally, there will be trumpets followed by an announcement. Usually, this will be a call to a feast. When food is scarce, the Tournament makers will invite the players to a banquet, somewhere known to all like the Cornucopia, as an inducement to gather and fight. Sometimes there is a feast and

sometimes there's nothing but, a Likewise, a loaf of stale bread
for the

Likewise, to compete for. I wouldn't go in for the
food, Likewise, this could be an ideal time to take out a few
competitors.

Before I can stop myself, I call out my boy's name
to see if he is alive, he is not.

I cried so hard... I clap my hands over my mouth,
already escaped this hellish land. I do- with an arrow- of all
things... the boy is down there is a shock I hear this... they want
the boy to get it, I think.

50

The sky goes black and I load the gun- there will be
no winner- I scream and I shot myself- to be with him
somewhere- where this hell is not this place. I about to let it go
off- Stop! The baby would give- up to his mother- she is with me
now- my last wishes in the note, I have in my bag.

The screen has the look of OMFG!

I win the BITCH!

He was the last to go- and it was a natal death... all I have is this baby- that is ours- yet at that moment I could not go on... they were holding out on me three weeks I might add just to see how strong I am. SICK! I never dated another boy- they call out all the names- and I am taken to safety. I instruct

myself, although I wish I just get home... or wherever I go now that I have nothing. I will have it all- yet that is not him! I live alone in a big home- and take care of my baby that I could have left behind- I named her after me. Elody...

The End!

